

# Organizing Global Civil Society:

## The World Social Forum 2004

by

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Giuseppe Caruso

To Flavia, Nino and Giovanna



## **Abstract**

The World Social Forum (WSF) was started in Brazil in 2001 to challenge the World Economic Forum. It has since generated a number of regional to local forums, and become the most conspicuous expression of global civil society (GCS). The WSF has been characterised as a space that facilitates the gathering of people with the objective to create alternatives to neoliberalism. The aim of this thesis is to assess the nature and viability of the vision of the WSF. I identify its ideological contours, the immediate political objectives of its activists and the instruments they devised to achieve their goals. In order to do so, I studied the organisational process that led to the WSF annual event held in India in 2004 (WSF2004). By focusing on a specific national expression of the WSF I question some of the analytical tenets of the WSF discourse. In particular I assess the claims that it is a global “public sphere” or a global “open space” as defined in its Charter of Principles (Charter). Rather, I claim, the WSF, both as local instantiation and as global projection, is an expression of conflicting interests and ideological aspirations generated by specific social structures that shape it in ways that do not immediately fulfil the ideals defined in its Charter. The findings of my research do not argue against the global scope of the WSF and for a national approach to the concept of civil society. Rather they show how the global dimension attributed to the WSF is outcome of a recursively constitutive process involving, on one side, ideological aspirations and, on the other, actual social and political relations performed on multiple stages (from the local to the

transnational). On the basis of the findings of this thesis, I claim that interests, power dynamics and social structures (considered in this thesis as the specific conditions of existence of the Indian WSF) can assume new shapes in the wider space of GCS. This makes GCS, and the WSF in particular, the privileged arena where the economic, the political, the social, the cultural and the personal can be peacefully and democratically exposed, negotiated, contested and challenged.

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## List of Acronyms

ASF: Asia Social Forum

ASM: Assembly of Social Movements

BOC: Brazilian Organising Committee

CSO&Ms: Civil Society Organisations and Movements

ESF: European Social Forum

FG: Functional Group

FS: Free Software

GCS: Global Civil Society

IC: International Council

ICS: Indian Civil Society

IGC: Indian General Council

IOC: Indian Organising Committee

IS: International Secretariat

IWC: Indian Working Group

IYC: Intercontinental Youth Camp

M&C: Media and Communication Functional Group

MOC: Mumbai Organising Committee

NC: National Consultation

PG: Programme Group

V&L: Venue and Logistics Functional Group



WDF: World Dignity Forum

WEF: World Economic Forum

WSF: World Social Forum

## Chapter 1. Introduction

In January 2004, in a convention centre in North-West Mumbai, 130,000 people gathered in the most important meeting of global civil society ever to take place in India<sup>1</sup>. During 6 days participants from 117 countries, representing 1653 organisations and social movements attended around 1200 conferences, seminars, workshops and cultural events. The avenues of the Nesco Ground, a former factory gone bankrupt after India's liberalisation in 1991, vibrated with chants of thousands of activists celebrating their coming together to protest against neoliberalism and the exploitation, marginalisation and war that it carries with it. Its halls hosted activists, movements' leaders and academics including Joseph Stiglitz, Aminata Traore, Shirin Ebadi, Arundati Roy, Asma Jehangir, Medha Patkar, and former Indian president KR Narayanan.

Demanding dignity, justice, equality, development, democracy, human rights, and peace, the most notable novelty of that gathering was its composition. For the first time organisations and activists from trade unions, religious organisations, libertarian movements, NGOs, grassroots organisations came together under the same banner, "Another World Is Possible", for the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the World Social Forum (WSF). The confidence in their slogan seemed to be legitimate after one more successful edition of an initiative launched few years earlier. The first chapter of such a vibrant encounter was launched in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in

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<sup>1</sup> As agreed by all organisers in the evaluation meeting that took place in Mumbai in February 2004

January 2001: it proposed to offer an alternative to the World Economic Forum (WEF). In the WEF the richest men and women in the world meet, from 1971, the most powerful politicians and successful academicians to design the implementation of the neoliberal canon (Roy, 2004:52; Sklair 1998; Pigman, 2007); the WSF gathered civil society organisations and movements (CSO&Ms) antagonistic to neoliberalism.

The WSF, the most important expression of global civil society (Glasius and Timms, 2006; Glasius 2005; Anheier et al., 2004), initiated a process that promises to establish a new global alliance among CSO&Ms on the basis of their rejection of neoliberalism and their aspirations to a more equal and just world. In what ways does the WSF, as it claims, provide GCS with the necessary infrastructure (Glasius and Timms, 2006; Anheier et al., 2004; Katz and Anheier, 2005) to achieve the desired success against “neoliberalism”, “any form of imperialism”, and “capitalist globalisation” (Charter, Chapters 1 and 4)?

The WSF has now reached its 7<sup>th</sup> edition: from 15,000 participants attending the first WSF, to more than 200,000 who gathered at the poly-centric forum in 2006, in Bamako, Caracas, and Karachi. The organisational machine of the WSF provided a platform for activists of the five continents to stretch their reach and link themselves to the thousands of forming or already existing transnational networks confronting neoliberalism (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Castells, 1996 and 1997; Khagram, et al., 2002; Smith et al., 1997; Castells et al., 2005).

Although still a rather new phenomenon the WSF is the heir and successor of important traditions that date back several decades: the independence movements of African and Asian countries, the movements against dictatorship in Latin America, Indigenous movements from around the world, the labour movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement, the NGO counter-summits to the UN conferences in the 90s, the '68 movement, the movements against structural adjustment imposed by the World Bank and the IMF, the demonstration against the global institutional framework of neoliberalism (WB, IMF, G8, WTO, EU) such as the Seattle battle in 1999, which have all been networked for decades.

Aside from the sheer number of participants to the annual events, the unprecedented diversity of their political and social backgrounds constitutes the most relevant object of enquiry around the WSF. This dissertation discusses the mechanisms through which the process of alliance building has taken place in the run up to the event in Mumbai in January 2004 (WSF2004) as a local instantiation of a global process. That process has, for the first time in India, united in a common organisational effort all the sectors of the highly fragmented national civil society. How has the WSF framework achieved this in the Indian political context? Has that been a momentary or a more long lasting alliance? How has the India process influenced the WSF global framework?

By answering these questions I propose to shed some light on the WSF as a global phenomenon and on its future trajectory. While addressing those questions I will engage with more general issues related to the vision of a better world envisaged

by the WSF and its foundational values. Crucial among all those values and at the centre of the WSF discourse is “difference”. Valuing difference in the WSF means surpassing divisions, formulating shared strategies, designing new tools and struggling for a world beyond exclusion, racism, communalism, casteism, classism, and war. Through the study of the daily performances of the organisational tasks of the Indian Organising Committee (IOC) I argue that the WSF has the potentiality to help formulate and consolidate civil societies at levels from the local to the global and to constitute a fertile ground for the construction of a strong antagonistic counter-hegemony to neoliberalism. The potentiality to play such a role in the global political scenario is predicated upon the ability of the WSF organisers to design more and more sophisticated instruments and strategies of mobilisation and political action. These are necessary to avoid that the current imbalances of power within the WSF between new and traditional actors, political parties and small radical groups, local grassroots organisations and international NGOs, environmental activists and trade unionists, become an insurmountable obstacle to its expansion.

The structure of the present introduction is the following: in the next paragraph I discuss the relevance of the WSF as an object of investigation. The following section describes the fieldwork I did in India. Next, I discuss neoliberalism as the current dominant political and ideological regime that the WSF proposes to surpass. Global civil society is the topic of the following section: in Gramscian terms (Gramsci, 1971) GCS is the privileged terrain where the war of position against the neoliberal hegemony can be fought and won. I argue that this is the

strategy envisaged by the WSF to replace neoliberalism with a more just and equal political regime and to promote a better world based on what I call here with Pieterse (2006) emancipatory cosmopolitanism (see also Santos, 2002, 2005, and 2006; Beck, 2003 and 2006; Pollock et al., 2002; Mignolo, 2000 and 2000b; Dussel, 2002). I discuss this concept in a separate section of this chapter. I conclude by discussing the methodology for treating the material collected. The last section of the chapter is an outline of the overall thesis.

## **1. The WSF as an Object of Investigation**

The ambitious promises and the sheer size of the events justify the growing scholarly attention for the WSF. But scholars and activists are not the only who have been attracted by the WSF claims that “events such as these can become an irresistible movement from below that alter history” (Chenoy, 2004). The Canadian Intelligence Service (RUPE, 2003)<sup>2</sup>, which defines the WSF networks as powerful and effective social actors, the New York Times<sup>3</sup> that considers the WSF “the world second superpower”, confirms the activists' confidence that a new powerful actor has entered the global political scene and promises not only to challenge the power of the United States but also, as some would suggest, to promote what Salamon (1994) called a “global associational revolution”. Some scholars of the WSF (Wainwright, 2004; Ghimire, 2005), stress that the WSF is already setting the agenda of the current political debate.

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<sup>2</sup> See also, on this attitude, the 1998 Arroyo Report about the envisioned strategies of the US military to engage the Zapatistas' “netwar” (Morris-Suzuki, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, 2003. See also Mukerjee, 2005.

A focus of many attentions and expectations, the WSF achievements have yet to be fully tested against its stated goals. This is due mainly to its newness as a social phenomenon and to the difficulty to assess the success of the WSF against agreed criteria (Santos, 2005)<sup>4</sup>; due to its new organisational and ideological forms and its ambitious social, political and cultural goals, the WSF necessarily refuses assessment within traditional frameworks of political activism (Glasius and Timms, 2006). In this dissertation I assess if the WSF can bring about radical global social change. To do so is possible in two different ways:

1. by showing that the WSF is fostering a cultural and organisational counter-hegemony to neoliberalism based on inclusiveness, justice, equality, democracy, participation and peace;
2. and by proving the political and social efficacy of its actions.

On the second point, a number of commentators (Manduca, 2005) have debated the ability of the WSF to call for the biggest demonstration ever organised, held against the war on Iraq on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2003, or to indeed change the nature of the global political discourse (Hammond, 2006). I maintain here that it is premature to test the WSF against any political success or failure for two reasons: it is not the aim of the WSF to directly engage in political action and it is too early to measure its indirect social effects. In other words, this work examines tendencies and potentialities of the WSF rather than effects and outcomes that

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<sup>4</sup> According to Santos the WSF has to be tested against its mission to create a space of convergence rather than on the basis of its political victories (see also Whitaker, 2005).

have not yet consolidated into recognisable forms.

On assessing the political success of the forum in the short run or its ability to produce profound cultural changes albeit slow, Whitaker (2005) maintains that the success of the WSF can only be seen in the long run. According to him the WSF is offering a space for the construction of a new political subject, a global civil society. Moreover, for him the WSF is showing its power through the multiple actions that it is catalysing all over the planet (Whitaker, 2005). Many analysts suggested that the WSF has produced the coordination of forces that organized global actions against the global governance system (WB, IMF and WTO) (Glasius and Timms, 2006) and against war, as in the case of the demonstrations against the Iraq war (Manduca, 2005). Moreover, the WSF facilitated the creation of important networks of organizations involving feminist, anti-racist and labour movements among others (Glasius and Timms, 2006; Waterman, 2007). I examine these tendencies with respect to the Mumbai WSF.

Others (Sader, 2002; Wallerstein, 2002; Cassen, 2003 and 2003b; and Ferrari, 2003) have found that the change fostered by the WSF has been deceptively reduced but potentially still very high (Wallerstein, 2007). To tackle this issue they proposed that the WSF adopted a coherent organisational structure and a minimal political agenda in order to engage directly neoliberalism and its institutions. Radically against the institutionalization of the WSF are instead those who see in the impossibility of the WSF to be controlled by a global Comintern of professional activists its real strength (Bohm, 2005; Waterman, 2003c). The



question of the organisational form of the WSF and its mode of political action are of interest.

As far as point one above is concerned, it is crucial to test the WSF's ability to facilitate the construction of a global counter-hegemony to neoliberalism by assessing its principles and strategies. The Principles stated in the Charter have been widely negotiated and subscribed (see Chapter 2) by thousands of organisations and movements. Here I therefore test the WSF against the following two criteria:

1. the coherence between values and practices and
2. the consistence of those practices with its goal.

To conduct the assessment of the achievements and the potentialities of the WSF, I apply these criteria to the daily organisational and political practices of WSF2004. The outcome of such analysis is the following: although recurrent political and strategic inconsistency can be observed in the WSF due to its newness and the inexperience of its organisers and participants, however I observed some, albeit unstructured and uncoordinated (both at the national and at the global level), processes of institutional learning that offer solutions to the incoherence between stated values and organisational practices.

I examine these issues in the context of the Mumbai WSF, where I observed the continuous reproduction of social dynamics of exclusion. Dalits and Adivasi, and

all those not at ease with the English language or the political culture of the WSF, found themselves consistently at the margin of the process (see Chapter 3). Some of these exclusions have been contested, at times successfully, but social marginalisation is still wide and proximity to financial resources determines political power in the WSF.

The inconsistency between strategies and daily practices with the values stated in the Charter has already received comment. According to Sen (2004b) the WSF might become an activist brand imposed worldwide to social change activists in a universal manner completely devoid of any sensibility to cultural difference; a strategy inconsistent with the fulfilment of the WSF vision (see also Huish, 2006). He also critiques the contingent approach that many organisers have towards the forum, more as the management of an event for their immediate political convenience than as part of a broader struggle that must reformulate also a model of politics that has proved unsuccessful: that of the traditional left (Sen, 2004b). I will build on these kinds of criticisms (see chapter 4) by exposing the inherent political nature of the forum and the hegemonic practices played within it.

From the organisational point of view the forum has been accused not to respect its own values in its structure and its daily practice. As far as the daily organisational practices are concerned, critics have exposed lack of transparency and democracy (Teivainen, 2004; Klein, 2003; Whitaker, 2005; Biccum, 2005), accountability (Waterman, 2003c) and the presence of obscure bureaucracies and undemocratic strong powers (Albert, 2003; Waterman, 2003; Santos, 2005) so

important that could de-legitimise the WSF. The contradiction between values and practices is perceived, by some authors, as potentially achieving the opposite effect to the WSF stated goals: that of reinforcing neoliberalism and further marginalising radical attempts of rebellion. Sian Sullivan, commenting in this last point, provocatively writes that the WSF could help “foster the continuing exclusion of what is othered by modernity's hopeful but constraint humanism” and “iterate the constructed universalisms associated with modern and patriarchal humanism” (2005:374). This significantly limits the potentiality of the WSF “counter-hegemonic culture [to be] able to unravel the ontological assumptions underpinning modern institutionalism, and the multiple rationalist exclusions on which such organisational culture is constructed” (Sullivan, 2005:374). The organisational architecture of the WSF is an instantiation of the inconsistency between values and stated practices in the WSF. From its very beginning it has been extensively criticised for lack of democracy. The setting up by self-appointment of its organisational leadership and the co-option of its governance structures by its original core organisers, made many wonder about the democratic principles that informed those processes (Waterman, 2003c; Santos, 2005).

These limitations notwithstanding, the WSF shows important strong features that promise to overcome the current drawbacks. Santos (2005), explains how the many weaknesses of the WSF democratic structures are the inevitable feature of its learning process still at a very early stage of its evolution. Along the same lines, Wainwright (2004) adds that some of the weaknesses of the WSF show its ability to appreciate the creative power of chaos in building knowledge and of

networks in generating organisation and managing human and material resources. But this process, of formidable size and intensity, has not created immediately the inclusion it was advocating. Severe criticisms on the exclusive domains within the WSF have been voiced. The first editions of the forum in Brazil were white, educated, gendered (Albert, 2003; Waterman, 2003c, Santos, 2005; Waterman, 2004), racially unbalanced (Santos, 2005), mainly Brazilian (Teivainen, 2004; Albert, 2003; Santos, 2005). Later editions have proved the ability of the WSF to start addressing those weaknesses but were still plagued by several shortcomings: the allocation of tasks and roles in the organisation and in the events according to national or regional identity reproduced the logic that supposedly the WSF wants to surpass; larger organisations, with greater experience (NGOs or organisations linked to left parties) managed to put their interests to the fore (Santos, 2005; Whitaker et al., 2005; Glasius and timms, 2006); the ad-hoc application of norms and values of the Charter often favour personal and organisational interests (Sen, 2003); the privilege given to electronic tools of communication consistently excludes those who are not linked to the Internet. The vibrant debate I reported above and the importance of the themes it deals with justify the growing academic interest in the WSF and orient the present research.

## **2. Fieldwork**

Most of the material for this dissertation was collected during 9 months. I travelled to Mumbai invited by one of the members of the Indian Organising Committee (IOC) to take part as a volunteer in the work of the WSF office. When

I arrived in Mumbai, the atmosphere of the organisational space had changed dramatically from the days when the IOC member in London told me that the organisational process was taking place in an orderly, democratic and participatory fashion. Since my arrival I noticed that a heavy atmosphere loomed in the office. The tension was such, at times, as to impede the realisation of even the simplest working task. Everyone made sure, during my first weeks in Mumbai that I stayed away from those meetings in which the most delicate political and operational issues were discussed.

Soon I started suspecting that further conflicts had been sparked by my presence in the office. My suspicions found prompt confirmation. I was asked aggressively and suspiciously several times who I was, who had invited me there, which organisation I belonged to, how I had met the person who invited me and what kind of job I was meant to do for him. If before I was surprised, I was then astonished at what I had found in the office of a WSF, supposedly an initiative that promised to change the world to a new and more human, inclusive and just environment.

Later some of the people working in the office explained to me that I was not the cause of those conflicts that were raging in the office and clarified to me their nature. After 3 weeks in which I had already established my position in the geography of the office, one of the parties involved in the conflict was still avoiding contact with me and was conducting investigations by proxy on me through some of the people to whom I worked close. The other party in turn had

soon realised that I had no intention of siding any of the contenders and started behaving hostile or at best indifferent to my presence (at the moment of highest tension I was dismissively impeded to sit in an “open meeting” of the office coordination on the basis that “just no!” was a legitimate interpretation of the essence of the “open space” of the WSF). My work and my proved links with the international community of the WSF and the work I was doing to reconnect the links with the previous organisers and to establish a consistent flow of information between the English speaking Indian process and the Spanish and Portuguese speaking previous organising core, finally gained me trust and emptied any suspicious allegation on my political allegiances. Moreover, I eventually understood that the fights over me were just one more pretext to engage in more profound conflicts between two clearly opposed fields in the Indian civil society, as I document later.

I encountered further difficulties in carrying out my research in Mumbai due to the diffidence of some of the people involved in the WSF2004 organisational process towards academics (or “hair-splitters” as dubbed by some). This caused difficulties, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, to establish meaningful conversation with people who often claimed to be too busy to talk to me about irrelevant issues of an intellectual nature, or even to think about those issues. This though, I soon learnt, was only an introduction to incredibly meaningful interviews that helped me frame the topic of my research in a more substantive way than I had done until then. Moreover, the IOC was integrated by a remarkable number of PHDs, who, although at times condescending or even patronising,

often looked at my efforts with caring eyes. Some conversations with two of them became instrumental in contextualising, and testing afterwards, the questions of my research.

I had also one more set of related problems in first interacting in my new working place and later collecting quickly and effectively the material I needed for my research. This diffidence towards academic and intellectual work, extended to the administrative tasks in the office. The record keeping of the work done and of the political process (crucial to the design of consistent and transparent communication strategies within the office and between the office and the political structure of WSF2004 and its international partners) were affected in varying degrees. Often defined “useless paper work”, it included answering emails, office phones, keep minutes and establish unique tasks for office managers, volunteers, and staff. One of the outcomes of this attitude (that, although dealt with at a late stage of the process was never really addressed) was the chronic lack of consistent communication between decision-makers, organisers and the activists involved in the WSF.

The conflicts I had observed at my arrival escalated daily affecting the atmosphere in the office. The cost of those unending conflicts was extremely high not only at the organisational level; they often affected those involved, in a way or another, in the functioning of the office at a very intimate level. The continuous stress, the inability to fully comprehend the “real” course things were taking, and the recurrence of changes to the decisions taken made vain whatever work had been

done until then. All this was cause for sustained malaise, as often reported by office staff and volunteers. However, those conflicts contributed also to establish a strong creative tension within the office that produced incredibly valuable outcomes at levels that went beyond the great success of the WSF2004 event, and left indelible marks on the life of those who were involved in that process and on the Indian civil society.

The tensions generated by the conflicts mentioned above, created a sort of camaraderie which soon turned into friendship among volunteers and employees of the office. We spent in the office a minimum of 10 hours a day and we started spending some of the nights together in intercontinental group outings. In moments of special stress, mainly due to the website and information system breakdowns, we would come back at night to the office where the technicians would do their heroic maintenance of a badly designed system while the others would sing, share life stories and eventually sleep on tables, couches or the floor. The bonds that were built among us became much stronger than the tension that continuous fights had created at the level of the management of the office and leadership of the process. If the majority of volunteers and staff members had chosen to side for one of the contenders, the neutrality of some and the necessary faithfulness of others to those who paid their salaries<sup>5</sup> was never impediment to intense friendships.

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the volunteers working in the Mumbai office, worked for the organisations that were members of the political and administrative bodies of the WSF2004 organisational architecture. Their allegiance stayed with those who paid their salaries and this influenced consistently the relationships in the working place between volunteers and between them and the “managers” of the office.



The intensity of the human relationships and the acrimonies within such a contained space as the office; the importance of the endeavour and the instrumental role played by the conflict that intersected that space, heightened by the direct experience of the stress they created but also of the important political and cultural consequences they had, became one of the central theme of this thesis (see chapter 6). Conflicts were then crucial for “learning” and for the negotiation of the new alliance that the WSF promised to create between the many actors of GCS present in the halls and avenues of the Mumbai convention centre and before in the halls of the Catholic University of Porto Alegre and later in the Nairobi convention centre and all the other spaces in Karachi, Caracas, and Bamako that hosted the WSF events. Conflict was the dynamic through which the WSF was taking shape: I witnessed that, I also suffered some of the consequences of those conflicts but I also appreciated its creative outcomes.

### **3. The WSF and Neoliberalism**

While conflicts were present at the level of the daily political and organisational practices the most fundamental conflict the WSF is engaged in is that against neoliberal globalisation. Chapter 4 of the Charter of Principles of the WSF states that “the WSF stands in opposition to a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations’ interests, with the complicity of national governments”. In the run up to WSF2004 the ills of neoliberal globalisation were detailed in pamphlets and outreach material in unambiguous

terms: Neo-imperialism, cultural, economic and political marginalisation and inequalities between and within countries, the tragic consequences of financial liberalisation and SAPs<sup>6</sup>, militarisation, war<sup>7</sup> and repression in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine<sup>8</sup>, the subjection of states to international capital, the alienation of citizens from basic services, systematic exclusion of some religious and ethnic groups<sup>9</sup>, food insecurity and alienation of peasants from the land, threat to biodiversity, loss of control over local resources, unemployment and reduction of labour standards, production and dissemination of information by a handful of corporations<sup>10</sup>, deterioration of democratic structures and suspension of civil rights<sup>11</sup>, constant reinforcement of patriarchal domination, casteism and racism<sup>12</sup>, and the list could continue.

The complex galaxy of activities and proposals around the themes mentioned above and many others was nonetheless focusing on analyses of the ills created by neoliberalism and the actions to address them. The criticisms against neoliberal globalisation were articulated at the social, political, cultural and economic level and from all spatial perspectives from the local to the global.

At the social level, from the 80s onwards there has been a continuous erosion of stable jobs towards flexible jobs (Klein, 1999 and 2002; Waterman, 1998; Arrighi,

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<sup>6</sup> "Two decades of economic, social and political terrorism against the world's poor, exploited, and oppressed, which has been given euphemistic names such as 'structural adjustment' and 'liberalisation'" (WSF India, 2002b).

<sup>7</sup> Culture@WSF2004, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> WSF India, 2002b.

<sup>9</sup> Culture@WSF2004, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> WSF India, 2003b.

<sup>11</sup> WSF India, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Gujarat Social Forum, 2003.

1994; Bloom, 2000; Kiely, 2003) as a consequence of the intensification of market liberalization and global competition for cheap labour. The abuse on labour by TNCs went together with the abuses they perpetrated against the environment depleting non-renewable resources, unrestrainedly polluting the ecosphere (Dale, 2001) and had been exacerbated by the neoliberal turn (Kiely, 2005; Lowry, in Correa 2003:69). At the financial level, the booming of stock markets generated terrible financial crisis (South East Asia 1997 and Argentina 2000 being the two more recent events) that impoverished millions on the planet (Gowan, 1999). At the cultural level, global diversity is challenged by a homogenising monoculture spread via corporate global media and branding practices by big corporations (Barber, 1996 and 2002; Klein, 1999). All these are considered by the activists of the WSF as the consequences of a convergence between an ideology and a political movement. At the ideological level the free market is celebrated as the best institution to allocate scarce resources on a global scale through the natural laws of demand and supply, and competition (Bourdieu, 2001b). The WSF converged against the politics of “naturalization” (Bourdieu, 2001b) of neoliberal globalisation<sup>13</sup>, the root cause of social contradictions and the increasing intensification of the disciplining of human beings and their exploitation on a global basis (Burawoy, 2000; Foucault, 1991). At the political level this has been used to justify a counter-revolutionary movement lead by the world elite aiming at regaining the social ground lost during the post-war years of welfarism (Dale, 2001; Kiely, 2005; Harvey, 2005, Keane, 2003)<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> A process that Bourdieu called ‘paradoxical’ for being a politics of de-politicisation (see also Gill, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Barber (2002): “when we see religion colonize every other realm of human life we call it theocracy and turn up our noses at the odour of tyranny; and when we see politics colonize

The global elitist neoliberal counter-revolution had important consequences at the geopolitical level. Bilateralism had been replaced by unilateralism after the fall of the Berlin wall which had reduced the check on the only standing superpower. The need to secure scarce resources, especially oil, made the US and its Western allies anxious to secure sustained access to the important Middle Eastern reservoirs. Imperial control over market was, at least for part of the movement (often referred to as the “old face of politics”, radical trade unions, Marxist organisations linked to Communist parties), a necessary corollary of the expansion (following the final defeat of the socialist antagonist) of capitalism. The consequences were the unrestrained military drive by the US and its allies in Afghanistan first and in Iraq soon afterwards, but also the alleged support to at least one attempt of coup in Venezuela against its leftist populist ruler, and the aggressive diplomacy against North Korea, Iran and Syria.

Although not necessarily coherent and in fact often profoundly at odds with each other, those views of the global conjuncture catalysed the convergence of an unprecedented number of organisations and social movements from the most diverse social, political and geographical backgrounds. To all of those actors it was clear that the sustainability of the current system was at stake and with it the same survival of humanity and the same planet. On those principles and with the experience of decades of mobilisation and political struggles (see chapter 2) the WSF built its foundations. Within it converged, trade unions and environmental

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every other realm of human life we call it absolutism and tremble at the prospect of totalitarianism; but when we see market relations and commercial consumerism try to colonize every other realm of human life we call it liberty and celebrate its triumph?”.

movements, communist parties' offshoots and NGOs, peasant organisations and small anarchist collectives, grassroots organisations, women movements, sexual liberties movements, anti-caste and anti-communal movements and movements for independence and self-determination of oppressed peoples.

Those movements had struggled for decades against colonialism and neo-colonialism, against the imperialism<sup>15</sup> of the US and its Western allies and against the neoliberal global institutional framework constituted by organisations like the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. Those movements converged in the WSF by also choosing a symbolic antagonist that would represent all they struggled against: the WEF<sup>16</sup>. Against the falsely optimistic depiction of the planet by the WEF, which had offered a utopian view of a world where everyone could benefit from the free market and not only a limited elite of privileged, the WSF denounces that the relations of production of capitalism, of which neoliberalism is the current expression, inevitably destroy old communities, make consumers out of individuals, fragment society and reduce the ability of the individual to build sustainable and fulfilling lifeworlds (Marcuse, 1964; Sklair, 1998; Waterman, 2004, Habermas, 1980). Whatever the internal contradictions to the WSF represented by the contrasting views on specific issues (see chapter 5), the WSF constituted a global solidarity ground on the basis of the shared radical rejection of the assumptions and effects of the neoliberal hegemonic ideology. To it they offered an alternative that privileged community values over radical

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<sup>15</sup> WSF IS, 2003: "the imperial policy enforced after September 11 buried the multilateral projects of the planet's sole superpower: a unilateral America has introduced an aggressive and militarist foreign policy".

<sup>16</sup> WSF India, 2003.

individualism, collaborative enterprises versus competition and peace over violence. The WSF finds itself in the privileged position, I argue, to produce analysis of the present that, in Dussel's words, show the central problem and work out its solution:

The problem is the exhaustion of a civilizing system that has come to its end. The overcoming of cynical managerial reason (planetary administrative), of capitalism (as economic system), of liberalism (as ideology), of machismo (in erotics), of the reign of the white race (in racism), of the destruction of nature (in ecology) and so on presupposes the liberation of diverse types of the oppressed and/or excluded. It is in this sense that the ethics of liberation defines itself as transmodern (because the post-modern are still Eurocentric) (2002:71).

I define the vision built by the WSF on the counter-hegemonic assumptions mentioned above and in line with Dussel's approach, as an emancipatory cosmopolitanism (see chapter 3) (Dussel, 2002; Pieterse, 2006; Beck, 2006). In Gramscian terms the counter-hegemony to the current expression of capitalism, neoliberalism, expressed by the WSF, would have to contend with its adversary in a long war of position in the field of civil society. Given the scope of neoliberalism and its planetary expansion, the field of action is now Global Civil Society. The following section puts the WSF in context within the general debate on GCS. I ask if the WSF claims to bring about radical global social change by acting as a catalyst of the progressive and antagonistic GCS are legitimate.

#### **4. Civil Society and the WSF**

I argue in this section that the epistemological, social and political change advocated by Dussel (2002) is best pursued in the domain of civil society as a product of a war of position (Gramsci, 1971) between hegemonic neoliberalism and counter-hegemonic critical and emancipatory cosmopolitanism of which the WSF is at present the most influential expression. The argument I make runs along the following lines: neoliberalism has conquered its global hegemony in the field of global civil society (Lipschutz, 2005), the struggle against it has to be fought in the same field and on the same constitution of that field. I substantiate my argument by addressing first the question what is GCS by discussing the three features, analytical, normative and descriptive, of the concept. Then I engage with different approaches to civil society exposing their strengths and weaknesses. In particular I highlight how an excessive stress on the normative aspect of the concept limits considerably its analytical potential. I suggest that in order to increase the analytical effectiveness of the concept of civil society, an increased stress on empirical research is indispensable. The WSF offers a privileged perspective for such empirical analysis because it provides an insight on a vast range of CSO&Ms and their interactions at levels from the local to the global. It also provides the opportunity to study GCS-in-the-making. The sophisticated research methodologies to fulfil the task of studying an object of such scope and dimension such as the WSF will be discussed in the following section.

The concept of civil society, in a state of lethargic existence for decades, has been

revived in the 1980s in the context of Latin American and Eastern European struggles against authoritarian regimes from which many of the WSF activists, and its initiators, derive their political experience. Lately, the concept of civil society has been widely used in academic and activist contexts as “global civil society” and as dialectical antagonist to the concept of globalisation. The WSF is the most important instantiation of the dense webs of interconnections among organisations, social movements and their networks expressed within the progressive quarters of GCS. Moreover, some authors claim that the WSF constitutes (Anheier et al., 2004) the “political opportunity structure” of GCS, one that, according to the use of the expression in social movements' literature, translates social conditions into political action (McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1994 and 1996). In this case, the WSF would facilitate the translation of the condition of exploitation, insecurity, marginalisation and poverty experienced by large sections of the world population into a political counter-hegemonic process.

Anheier and his colleagues define GCS as “the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organizations, networks and individuals located between the family, the State and the market and operating beyond the confines of national societies, politics and economies”<sup>17</sup>. According to them GCS is an important matter of research due to its ability to provide instruments to reflect on globalisation and the complexities related to the relationships between the global economic, political and social spheres (Anheier, 2005). Building on the study of the transnational dimension of social movements and civil society organisations, explored by

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<sup>17</sup> Anheier et al., 2001:17.



authors like Florini (2000), Keck and Sikkink (1998), Smith et al. (1997), Anheier and his colleagues add to the descriptive and the analytic potentialities of the concept a strong normative dimension according to which GCS constitutes a direct dialectical opposition to the dynamics of economic globalisation. This intellectual operation should have the non indifferent value to bridge the two main perspectives on civil society: the liberal (built on the natural philosophy tradition of Locke, Hobbes, Kant, Rousseau, Toqueville and Putnam) and the structural analysis elaborated by Gramsci.

I maintain here that, although an important normative component is indispensable when discussing social change, the excessive normative thrust of most of the global civil society debate makes of the concept a weak analytical tool and one inherently prone to instrumental use. This translates in the debate on the WSF in an ineffective stress on the vision of a better world that it projects, rather than in analysis that help theorise its nature and the social and political relations within its boundaries.

In this sense, a robust analytical work should expose how the liberal tradition of civil society makes the concept (along with those of “human rights”, “good governance”, “social capital” “democracy”) one more instrument of the neoliberal activist state (Kiely, 2005; Harvey, 2005). The reasons for this ease of adoption by neoliberal institution for interests at odds with those of many of the organisations interacting within the sphere of global civil society, resides into its eschewing of the relevance of fundamental power imbalances within it and structural

differences that inform contrasting interests among the actors that operate in that sphere of society. These limitations caused the wholesale rejection of the concept of civil society (or its conflation with the concept of a “bourgeois civil society”) by Marx. Nonetheless, a Marxist author, the Italian Antonio Gramsci, elaborated a conception of civil society that does not elude fundamental questions of power imbalances and social stratification within civil society. Let me then turn then to the analytical strength of the Gramscian approach to civil society and its relevance in the context of the present research.

Gramsci's work, although built on Marx, offered a different understanding of the nature and potentialities of civil society as an analytical concept. For Marx, the separation between the political and the economic spheres (state and society) had been historically determined by the rise of capitalism and was the cause of the malaise of the capitalist society: alienation, exploitation and inequality. The existence of strong vested interests within civil society limited drastically the possibility to have a “free” civil society. Some members of it, in fact, on the basis of their direct ownership of the means of production had full domination over those who had only their labour to sell (by virtue of the wage relation). This imbalance of power and the vested interests of the capitalist class made a “bourgeois” civil society. Gramsci instead saw civil society as the social environment in which the domination of the ruling class was won but where it could also be challenged. Bourgeois rule was constructed through “hegemonic processes”: by these processes, based more on consent than coercion, subalterns ended up sustaining the reasons of the dominants. In this scenario a war of

manoeuvre against the state (revolution) was not to find the necessary support from the co-opted portions of the working class. Instead a long war of position had to be staged by using the same hegemonic strategies in order to build a counter-hegemonic force that would end up capturing the state. The terrain on which this war of position would take place was civil society. From a Gramscian perspective, therefore, GCS is an expression of the terrain of hegemony on the global scale and therefore the terrain in which neoliberalism gains its prominence but also where that position can be challenged.

Gramsci's approach is strongly analytical: he considered the conflict between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects as crucial for the determination of the dialectical dynamics of social change and civil society as the place within which this conflict took place. Moreover, he thoroughly investigated how civil society came about as an arena of society as consequence of the rise of capitalism and how it did change following the changing nature of capitalism (for instance as it changed from being a terrain where coercion was mainly exercised to a terrain where co-optation was the weapon used by the dominant class<sup>18</sup>).

The Gramscian understanding of potentialities and limitations of political action within the sphere of civil society inform large part of the WSF discourse. In fact, the WSF (see later chapter 2) is direct outcome of the intellectual elaboration and political practice of an organisational and strategic tool that owes substantially to Gramsci's work, that of articulation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). *Articulação*

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<sup>18</sup> This trend seems to have changed again lately.

(articulation in Portuguese) is at the root of the political alliance built in Brazil by the activists fighting against dictatorship. Those activists offered their experience to build a global alliance of CSO&Ms. Although highly influential, the Gramscian approach to civil society is not the only one professed in the WSF. In fact the normative nature of the liberal approach to civil society is fashionable in an important section of the WSF, especially among some international NGOs and their local partners and is theorised by authors like Keane (2003)<sup>19</sup>. The liberal conception of civil society has its roots in natural philosophy. For Locke the focus was mainly on the term “civil”, as opposed to “natural”, which referred to a society in which members interactions were regulated by the rule of law. Civil society moreover was formally separated from the State and autonomous from other social structures (the private). State power, was limited by the existence of a separate sphere made of “free” and “autonomous” individuals. Natural philosophers opposed in their work the term civil society to that of “natural society”. Within natural societies every individual had only the rights he could defend by himself. In civil societies instead each person enjoys civil rights that the state defended for them. The roles of the state were only that of preserving rights and legislate appropriately. The economic sphere has to be independent by the influence of the state.

On the basis of this tradition, Keane strongly criticises in his work the “naivety” of neo-Gramscian approaches to global civil society. He believes that any

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<sup>19</sup> According to Held (1995 and Held et al., 1999) GCS provides the necessary sphere for the articulation and enforcement of a new form of dispersed sovereignty that moves beyond the compartmentalised sovereignty of the modern nation state towards the construction of a system of global governance. Within that system civil society is not autonomous and self-governing because it is constrained within the framework of cosmopolitan laws. See also Beausang, 2002.

separation between fields of society and consequent opposition between them is simplistic and analytically untenable. So for instance: state laws determine the boundaries of the action of civil society organisations, the market is a fundamental space for civil society organisations to glean their resources (to keep autonomy from the state) and the family is the space where gender discriminations and patriarchy are fought (Fraser, 1997; Howell and Pearce, 2001; Howell, 2006)<sup>20</sup>. Keane's main argument is then that if GCS is hard to analytically pin down, what makes it a useful concept is the universal values and aspirations of civility, peace and tolerance on which it is grounded. He is not able to tell us much about what GCS is now and how it came about (if not that it is the whole of the world society minus the "mean" people). His main focus is instead on how a GCS will have to look like when built on cosmopolitan liberal values of freedom, rule of law, respect of human rights and cultural differences.

Authors who explore the origin of civil society in different contexts, showing its links with capitalism and exposing the specificities given to civil societies by different cultural and historical backgrounds (Kandiyoti, 1998 and 2001; Mamdani, 1996; Kaviraj and Khilnani, 2002; Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000; Chatterjee, 2002; Castro Leiva and Padgen, 2002), not only focus on the differences between civil societies but also within them highlighting how those differences refer to specific imbalances of power. These contributions provide me with a fundamental tool to analyse some of the most fundamental conflicts in the

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<sup>20</sup> Moreover, GCS is populated by complex interactions of civil society organisations with state and quasi-state organisations, family institutions, international organisations (like WB or WTO) and local and global business (Sandbrook, 2000, cited by Beausang, 2002). Those interactions create the ground for the elaboration of new forms of cosmopolitan democracy (Archibugi, 2002). See also Scholte 2000 and 2000b.

WSF and their potentialities but also the limitations of those approaches to conflict management that focus on a utopian future without concentrating on the present set of power imbalances (political settlement in Khan's words, 1996) and inequalities in the civil societies that make the WSF and within the WSF itself.

Concerns about the smuggling of neoliberal ideologies within the WSF through organisations involved in its institutional frameworks (many denounce the ambiguous role of big international NGOs who work with and for governments and enjoy consultative status within the World Bank) are legitimate. However, civil society offers an extraordinary arena to challenge inequality and injustice at global level and also within its same confines. I argue here against strongly critical assessments of global civil society (see for instance Amoore and Langley (2004), Burchell (1997), Chandhoke, (2002) that suggest that the flattening of the concept of civil society (to the extent that international institutions, bilateral agencies, states and non-state actor, and social movements all claim civil society to be the panacea for all problems of world society) make of GCS a useless analytical tool<sup>21</sup>. Civil society can be the powerful tool many claim if a recursive virtuous cycle of engagement between the state and civil society is instantiated and if power struggles within civil society are fully appreciated (Schuurman, 2004; Evans, 2001).

By facilitating a global convergence of radical CSO&Ms, the WSF has introduced into the world scenario a new political actor that could be able to engage state,

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<sup>21</sup> For Foucault (1995) and Fox and Starn (1997) GCS is a space for disciplining the global subject.

supra-state and corporate powers and influence the institutions of global governance and the deeper structures of the global society. Such is the scope and the complexity expressed by the WSF that it seems at time to elude a definition in the singular. However, I maintain here that it is indeed possible to think of the WSF as a contained, albeit massive in size and scope, system. The WSF is the result of the interaction of a field of forces (Bourdieu, 1984) of global scope and reach. The number of forces that field involves is impressive and can dishearten the social researcher. Moreover, the intensity and direction of those forces is ever changing. More, the relative value of those forces changes as a consequence of internal (to the field) political struggles and external influences. All these complexities make the work of the analyst ever more inspiring and demand exceptional sensibility and discernment and sophisticated methodological and analytical tools. I discuss those in the following paragraph. I claim that sophisticated methodologies and accurate and lengthy field researches are fundamental in grounding the theoretical arguments on GCS on solid empirical basis and limit its tendency to over-emphasise speculation over observation as often denounced (Burawoy, 2000; Marcus, 1998; Marcus and Fisher, 1985).

The questions arising from the review of the literature on civil society and that constitute the focus of the present research can be formulated as follows: Is the WSF, in its claim not to engage in direct politics, reproducing the opposition between state and society sternly and convincingly criticised by Jeffrey and Lerche (2000) and Chandhoke (2002)? Can the WSF be considered an instantiation of that counter-hegemonic GCS which, according to Gramsci, can be

expected to challenge the neoliberal hegemony? Before engaging directly these issues I will discuss the methodology of my research.

## **5. Methodology**

I will state at the outset that the nature of material collected for the present dissertation and the focus of it deserve few caveats. This research does not focus on the mere celebration of convergence and diversity of the global civil society (as expressed by the Charter of Principles of the WSF) during the six days of the annual WSF event. Although a remarkable occasion to investigate the interactions among civil society activists and some of the dynamics, tensions and potentialities that traverse that field, it is though only a minor aspect of the wider WSF organisational process.

During the months running between two annual events, activities are vibrant and without pause to allow the complex negotiations between sectors and conflicting interests among organisers in the host country and across national boundaries (as detailed in what follows). Those complex negotiations taking place during the organisational process, the conflict they generate and the strategies to ensure the transformation of dysfunctional into functional conflicts are the focus of the present work.

The WSF constitutes a totally new object of analysis for the social scientist. The



sheer amount of data collected, the size of the process and the annual events, the extraordinary complexity of the political, social and cultural dynamics it involves and their geographical distribution make of the WSF an extremely challenging object of study. Faced with such complexity, size and scope, I devised a strategy that could give me a legitimate grasp of the issues analysed. The main quality of the methodological toolkit I devised was its flexible structure made of easily interchangeable observation, interview and analysis tools. This methodology proved to be robust and allowed me to collect and process a great amount of data both in real and virtual fieldworks in India, Brazil, Italy and London, using extensive participant observation and formal and informal interactions with organisers and participants to the local events and the global process. The main foundational principle that has informed my methodological elaboration has been built on the necessity to counterbalance the normative thrust of the debate on the WSF with a comparably strong analytical dimension. This in order to thoroughly deal with the reality of its day to day organisational and political existence and expose crucial contradictions in its structure and political practices. Exposing those contradictions, I argue, is fundamental to appreciate the real opportunities hidden in the WSF process and the obstacles and limitations that might frustrate its attempts to bring about radical global social change.

The body of data that I collected for this thesis has never been collected for any other WSF event and constitutes my main contribution to the understanding of the WSF in its more intimate constitutive dynamics. I had access to all the documentation produced in the WSF office and the debate that was exchanged in

the organisational mailing lists. I attended all the meetings that took place in the office (of the coordination of the office, of employees and volunteers, of the Mumbai Organising Committee (MOC), of the IOC, of the functional groups). Slowly I gained the trust of some of the IOC members and I had the chance to collect fundamental information, otherwise reserved, on the nature of the conflicts that were taking place not only in the office but in the whole WSF process and on their political but also personal motivations. That body of data amounted to thousands of pages of documents produced between February 2003 and June 2004 and several other hundreds of pages of process emails and documents exchanged to date in the mailing lists of the WSF. Among the official material collected are also the hundreds of pages of minutes of almost all the meetings held (and that had minutes recorded, not a universal fact at WF2004) and my daily personal notes and the minutes I took of all the meetings I attended. Transcripts of structured and informal interviews complement that material and logs of virtual chats and virtual exchanges with employees, volunteers and organisers of WSF2004 and IYC2004 complete the list. To this first hand material I added the literature produced on the WSF since 2001, reports of the process and events circulated over the Internet, and the global debate on WSF2004.

My position as involved researcher, my otherness and my “inbetweenness” (also due to the fact that my partner was Indian) among the crowd that populated the Mumbai office, contributed a great deal to construct a privileged observation point. The inbetweenness (George, 2000) was defined by my liminal (Bhabha, 1994) position between the Indians and the Europeans, the youth of the IYC and

the adults of the IOC, the activists and the scholars, etc. and produced what Fardon called my constitutive hybridity as an anthropologist<sup>22</sup>. It was this specific positioning that gave me the chance to be “here” and “there” in so many different contexts, not fully recognised by anyone and by everyone too often tested for trustworthiness and allegiance, but as often trusted as a non-party to the ongoing conflicts for heartened confessions on the more intimate “secrets” of the WSF2004 universe. One day, at a programme meeting of the IYC, some of the participants launched themselves in a frustrated raving about how “they” (Europeans and Brazilians) thought they could tell “us” (the Indians) how to organise “our” camp. The argument went on for several minutes and it bordered often on intolerance of which I was thoroughly astonished. Suddenly someone imposed his authority to stop this pointless ranting and asked to “at least” respect our “brother Giuseppe” who might not feel comfortable with what we are saying about “his people”. There were a few moments of embarrassed silence. Then one of the people who with more enthusiasm claimed for “us” the right to decide whatever “we” wanted for “our” programme and who cares about continuity and the Charter of Principles of the WSF, with a sincere big smile looked around the room exclaiming: “oh c'mon man! Giu-Bhai (my nickname in those days) (...) you don't care, do you? if I trash a bit those *goras* [derogatory for white men], right?”. Something similar happened one night before going to sleep in the room that I was sharing with some other volunteers. Someone was complaining heavily about the supposed inability of the Indians to get any work done, and that was the reason

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<sup>22</sup> Fardon, (1995:11): “If (...) the anthropologist's view was once construed as the capacity either to step outside spatio-temporal coordinates to which others were consigned, or to occupy some privileged position within them, then under conditions of globalisation of culture, when externality has become impossible, the position of privilege is accorded instead to hybridity, the capacity for multiple positioning”.

why WSF2004 was risking becoming a farce. After few minutes someone stopped the conversation that was drifting towards derogatory observations, in the following way “oh guys restrain yourselves or Ju-Bhai will tell the Indians everything”.

On several occasions I was asked to explain what was in the minds of “those Europeans” or “those Indians”, and what was motivating some actions that simply seemed inexplicable: like when some volunteer translators started throwing typewriters, chairs and other pieces of furniture out of the window of the office at the venue of WSF2004 in protest towards the office management that was supposedly not allowing them to do their job. In another occasion I was asked by a “European” why were we being thrown out of our residence by a mad Indian who always thought he had full control over us and who spoke a language which although using English words made often no rational sense to anyone.

My positioning within the WSF2004 space depended also on more delicate ethical issues about the way in which a researcher negotiates his position within a political movement as a scholar and activist and how, as Escobar (1992) well put it, he can find a neutral enough observation point when strong conflicts traverse the movement. In order to deal with the great complexities of my positioning within WSF2004 and in order to be faithful to my mission as researcher, I devised an ad-hoc toolkit to carry on my fieldwork<sup>23</sup>. The main characteristics of my

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<sup>23</sup> The approach to data collection and processing followed Clemente’s polyphonic approach (1991). See also Escobar: “That the task of representing cultures (...) takes on unprecedented dimensions in social movements studies to the extent that the cultural and political significance of the many voices that converge in a fieldwork situation, the discursive positioning of

fieldwork were the following:

- It took place in several locations<sup>24</sup>: Brazil, Italy, India, and UK (I attended WSF2003 and WSF2005 in Brazil, ESF2002 Italy and ESF2004 in London) in order to better understand the dynamics inspired in different localities by the WSF framework and therefore to fully appreciate the Indian “specificities”.
- It was conducted using a whole range of different strategies and techniques: from direct to virtual interaction.
- It had a fundamental component of participant observation,
- It was characterised by a specific disposition towards research/activism.

I used also more traditional tools in the preliminary phase of design of this research: to test the general validity of my hypothesis I circulated among participants, organisers of the forum and organisers of events, critics and academics directly involved in the WSF a questionnaire that helped me better frame the questions at the heart of my research. Of special importance to my fieldwork was the informal interviews and long unfocused conversations with informants and key actors of the WSF organisational process, information exchanged on the basis of a profound pact of friendship, and had the nature often

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researchers, activists and collective actors, and the complex epistemological and political negotiations inevitably at stake will not be amenable to facile simplifications. A radicalization of discursive models of ethnographic fieldwork and writing ('dialogical', 'polyphonic' and the like) may be possible” (1992:420-1).

<sup>24</sup> Marcus, 1995; Clifford, 1992; Haney, 2000.

of gifts.

Based on the disciplinary tradition of anthropology, this toolkit draws heavily from other disciplinary contexts: ethnography of the cyberspace (Hine, 2000), history (Appadurai, 2000; Rangan, 2000) and ethnohistory (Burawoy et al., 2000) to delineate the background of the processes studied and their origins, pedagogy (Freire, 1987; Appadurai, 2000), political economy (Edelman, 1999 and 2002), hermeneutic, discourse analysis and interpretive methods (Geertz, 1973; Burawoy, 2000; Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Dilley, 1999).

My use of virtual tools deserves special mention and consideration. The WSF is only partially a real space: its very structure is being built over the Internet by constant communication among the actors involved. The toolkit I devised to gather and analyse that data is useful not only for the WSF but also for those objects of research highly transnational that share their existence between realms of the real and of the virtual and have strong normative boundaries that define their actions and their aspirations. My methodological toolkit operates as a feedback loop between a solid and consistent theoretical framework, through a systematic collection of relevant data, and a coherent and detailed analysis of those data, back to the re-definition of the original theoretical position (Barth 1993; Ingold, 1996)<sup>25</sup> and into the actors studied through my direct behaviour and

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<sup>25</sup> Theory is necessary because it refers to the ways in which we daily engage the world and not to the way in which we construct representations of it: theory is, therefore, inherently political (Ingold, 1996:1). In this sense, if I give due space to the study of the system of signs and symbols carried by the actors in WSF2004 however I do not privilege them over the system of social relations (Dilley, 1999:51). My reliance on ethnography is then not an escape from theorisation but a way to claim the possibility of a more accurate way of theorising that lead



my analysis. Although multi-sited and partially virtual, the fieldwork was rooted in place (Escobar, 2001; Bernard, 1998), but it also had an acute sensibility for the global (Burawoy, 2000; Marcus, 1995). The extended participation in, and observation of, the WSF2004 organisational process was crucial in reaching a faithful representation and give an intellectual order (Malinowski, 1932) to the multiple 'Others' (Clifford, 1988) that constitute not only the nature of the WSF but also its normative aspirations.

The specific ability of anthropology in theorising social movements and society stands, as Fardon (1995:18) puts it, in its ability to construct counterworks: “to every hegemony a resistance (Salmond), to every knowledge an ignorance (Hobart), for every mixture terms that must be imagined as separable (Harris), for every syncretism a play of parts (Palmi), for each essence claimed a deconstruction (Hertzfeld), and for every containment or elimination a potential dispersal (Parkin)”. This accounts for the dichotomy between theory and ethnography, constitutive of anthropology (Moore, 1999). The traditional anthropological fieldwork had to be complemented by other investigative strategies in order to get a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between social structures and cultural places (Burawoy, 2000). In my work I use extensively the work of authors who, although not anthropologists, made wide use of the anthropological method, namely Gramsci, Bourdieu and Foucault. I consider my fieldwork strategy an evolution of Gluckman's “extended case method” and its strong focus on endemic conflicts and schism (Turne, 1974). For

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“not to a rejection but to a reform of science” (Ingold, 1996:19). See also Reyna, 2001.

the members of the Manchester school, the conflict was ubiquitous but it was also functional to social change. Turner (1967) and Barth (1969), following Gluckman's lead, paid also important attention in their fieldworks to the discrepancies between norms and practices and looked at the contradictions that generated them, both internal to the context researched and externally generated (Burawoy, 2000) As Burawoy observes, the teaching of the Manchester school were embraced by Bourdieu who put the stress in his work on "social process, the divergence of norms and practices, the manipulation of rules, the functionalism, and the concept of field. Even Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be found in Victor Turner's work" (2000:21). However, Bourdieu departs from the legacy of the Manchester school insofar as, again in Burawoy's words, he "focuses on domination rather than on the functions of conflict, the peace in the feud, and the ritual of rebellion. Second, his focus on reflexivity demands that we recognize that we are of the world we study, that we are accountable to the 'natives', who now talk back. No longer can we pretend to any clear demarcation between us and them. The political and economic orders that upheld such divisions have fallen" (2000:21). This last argument introduces the discussion of another of the concerns that shaped my field research.

I applied my method to focus on the following issues central to the WSF: neoliberalism and the relationships between civil society, the state, and the global. These themes are discussed in the WSF through praise of local specificities and full respect of differences and I made sure to highlight how differences and the social systems they refer to are in fact deeply embedded in hierarchical relations



of power (Scott 1992:372-3). Moving from the small to the bigger picture I follow in my analysis Ong's suggestion that paying thorough attention to the relations between state and society, in relation to the global economy, will allow the discussion of different forms of liberalism, a perspective that will challenge simple assertions of East-West cultural differences (here understood as Brazilian vs. Indian WSF). Anthropology, perhaps more than any other Western social science, can show that we can no longer afford to ignore "alternative" modernities (Ong, 1999) "produced elsewhere in the world" (Ong, 1999b:66). In this context these suggestions will assume a slightly different meaning when highlighting the specificities of neoliberalism and the local struggle to oppose it: against a version of a global WSF struggling against a global neoliberalism I will show how localised forms of reaction link with others in regional, transnational and eventually global complex networks of civil societies.

## **6. Participant Activist Observation**

One constitutive feature of my fieldwork deserves here particular attention. In the highly conflictual environment represented by the Mumbai office it was particularly difficult to apply traditional interview techniques. Moreover, my presence in the office was looked at the beginning with suspicion. I've been told several times that members of the office management and of the IOC were expecting me to enquire about the most hidden secrets of WSF2004 organisational structures and this made them uncomfortable. When, at the beginning I asked to interview with some of the members of the decision-making bodies of WSF2004 I

often got answers explaining the incredible workload that everyone had to deal with. Some suggested that I left aside my inquiries and got work done for the organisation of WSF2004 if I really cared about the WSF. Of course all these denials of formal or informal interviews represented themselves incredibly valuable material for my research, but what I want to highlight here, is something else. I introduced myself not only as a researcher, somehow removed from the centre of the action, observing the social dynamics in the Mumbai office without being part of them. I introduced myself as a researcher activist. I was aware of my role in the office and how that would influence my research. At the same time I made clear that the purpose of my research was to produce relevant knowledge for the WSF. For me working in the office and for the WSF, and researching it, were two aspects of the same intellectual and political attitude.

I tried to elaborate in my fieldwork and in the following writing process the irresolvable tension of anthropology described by Mitchel as “the need to separate oneself from the world and render it up as an object of experience, and the desire to lose oneself within the object world and experience it directly” (1988:29, quoted in Moore, 1999). Participant observation is the methodological answer to this tension. In my fieldwork I was directly involved in the organisation of the WSF2004 and my work caused, directly and indirectly, decisions to be taken, things to be changed. My role as involved actor gave me the necessary legitimisation to be there but also created complex issues of scholar neutrality. This last issue, in fact, is not more than an illusion. Moore (1999) writes well about the ethical issues related with participation in the context of the research:

Anthropologists like others, cannot control the effects of their interventions, and good intentions do not always produce good results. To say this is to say little more than that moral action is always flawed, and the fact that something is flawed is not necessarily a reason to abandoning it. (...) Moral convictions always need to be tempered with a relativist stance in anthropology – albeit a temporary one – because if they are not then understanding is precluded in favour of judgement (13).

She later adds that

whenever we engage in discussion about morality and engagement in anthropology, we need to maintain a critical awareness of the cultural values that underpin the pre-theoretical commitments implicit in such discussions. Terms like objectivity and morality imply universal attributes which are part not only of liberal Western discourses, but are also a constitutive factor in the making of Western culture in its distinction from other cultures, and thus, of course, a constitutive part in the creation of the possibility of anthropology as a discipline and a practice [as in ]. Anthropology's engagement with other cultures means an engagement with other values and pre-theoretical commitments, it does not mean a collapsing of distinctions between value frames or the permanent withdrawal of the possibility of value judgement" (14)<sup>26</sup>.

Bourdieu wrote (2001b) on the necessity to bridge the gap between academics and activists (what he calls "the deadly division"<sup>27</sup>), often created along the lines of post-modern thought or activist fetishism. This approach sheds some light on potentialities and limitations of the WSF and the responsibility that researchers have towards the movements they study. Moreover, if fully exploited a renewed

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<sup>26</sup> See also Gellner, 1996 and Fausto and Neiburg, 2002: 312.

<sup>27</sup> My translation from Spanish.

alliance between activists-researchers and researchers-activists (obtained by blurring the boundaries of these radical dichotomies, as shown above among the main contribution of the anthropological method) would provide the counter-hegemonic movement with crucial strength to oppose neoliberalism who, in turn, can mobilise enormous material and symbolic resources (Alvarez et al., 1998; Escobar, 1992).

To accomplish this further task advocated by Bourdieu, fieldwork is the perfect context in which not only theories are designed but also cognitive systems can be unpacked, exposed and therefore negotiated (Ingold, 1996:4) both in the academic and in the activist world: the main outcome of this negotiation is the blurring of the borders between the two worlds. In this case as in all others mentioned above radical dualism cannot any more account for the complexities of the subject of our studies. In Moore's words (1999:19), "Diversity and difference have taken on new meanings in anthropology and the major controversies and debates can no longer be approached satisfactorily through traditional dualisms". Ingold (1996:5) further reinforces this concept by exposing how academic thought is based on dichotomies all centred on the primordial good/evil which can be broken and renegotiated in engaged fieldwork research/action (Graeber, 2004:335).

The toolkit described above and the role played by this kind of research for the development of the WSF as a global movement are closely connected. Research such as the present one, I claim, help redefine categories of analysis, as well as methods of investigation, and establish solid foundations to a critical and

fieldwork oriented epistemology which, in turn, can feedback on the epistemology that the WSF is creating as a tool for social change (Santos, 2005). I believe this is a crucial feature of the fundamental learning process that is the core of the WSF politics: a learning process, through critical action that promises to spark radical social change at the global level.

On the role of research as instrument of social transformation Appadurai suggests that “by providing a complex picture of the relationship between globalisation from above (as identified by corporations, multilateral agencies, policy experts and national governments) and below, collaborative research on globalisation could contribute to new forms of pedagogy (in the sense of Freire, 1992 and 1998) that could level the theoretical playing field for grassroots activists in international fora” (2000:17). In this sense the objective of the WSF could be described as one to design “a new architecture for producing and sharing knowledge about globalisation” that would be able to “provide the foundations of a pedagogy that closes this gap and helps democratise the flow of knowledge about globalisation itself. Such pedagogy would create new forms of dialogue between academics, public intellectuals, activists, and policy-makers in different societies. The principle of this pedagogy will require significant innovations. This vision of global collaborative teaching and learning about globalisation may not resolve the great antinomies of power that characterise the world, but it might help to even the playing field” (Ibid.)<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> See Burawoy (2005) and Brint (2005).

## **7. Structure of the dissertation**

The questions I ask in this work are the following. Can the WSF facilitate the elaboration of a viable global alternative to neoliberalism? Can we anticipate a global civilizing process proposed by the WSF? Is the WSF herald of a more secure, equitable and democratic world order? I answer these questions as follows: the WSF can indeed facilitate the elaboration of an alternative to neoliberalism. This alternative global civilising process would be based on cosmopolitan principles. While advocating a cosmopolitan world the WSF is also elaborating sophisticated and widely negotiated strategies for conflict management and resolution and formulating strategies for the creation of forms of solidarity that enhance global exchange of resources, information and knowledge exorcising fatal civilisation clashes. I substantiate these claims by analysing organisational and political dynamics of the WSF with specific reference to WSF2004, India. I will concentrate on nature and contradictions of the Indian WSF.

The following chapters are structured as follows: Chapter 2 discusses the history of the WSF, the specificities of the Indian political field as the fertile ground from which WSF2004 has blossomed and its complex internal dynamics. I answer the following questions: how has the WSF occurred, developed and spread? What is the relationship between this movement and others in the global scenario? How was the WSF received in India? What were the expectations of the Indian activists in receiving the WSF into their political field?

Chapter 3 discusses the nature of the WSF. How should it be conceived? Is it sufficiently cohesive to bear description in the singular? What kind of change is advocated by the WSF? What are the strategies it is devising to achieve its goal? Chapter 4 discusses the “open space”. It is the distinctive element of the WSF discourse. It has been used to describe the forum, to define its vision and as a mobilising tool. Here I track back the process of introduction of the open space concept in India and I expose its strengths and weaknesses. I answer the following questions: in what ways is the WSF’s political discourse ‘new’? What are the indications that the WSF with its set of values, organisational guidelines and structures, differences and conflict management tools, be able to provide an effective toolkit and an arena for the negotiation of social, cultural and political differences at the global level?

Chapter 5 discusses the WSF India political configuration as it developed in the run up to WSF2004 and the complexities and conflicts within it. Here I apply the findings of chapters 3 and 4 to assess the political process of WSF2004. How is the relationship between WSF and political parties and NGOs developing? How do they gather and concentrate the WSF consensus and turn it into political strength, or, conversely, hijack the innovative framework and empty it of any efficacy or, as a third, more ambitious, option: will the negotiation between hegemonic forces in the WSF create an entirely new subject in India?

Chapter 6 discusses the administrative-organisational practices of WSF2004,

conducting a similar assessment of its dynamics as chapter 5 did to the political structures of the WSF India. Policy making in civil society organizations can be quite opaque: who take the decisions, following what procedures and for what interests? What is the tension between political and technical approaches to the organisational process in the WSF? What are the procedures to assess origins and causes of conflicts both within GCS organisations and in the wider society? What are the specificities of the conflicts that took place in the WSF? What are the strategies that GCS can develop in order to deal with recurrent conflicts? What is the nature of those conflicts and their origin?

Chapter 7 will examine the consequences of the Indian WSF on the global WSF movement and on Indian civil society. I will look into the following issues: do the International Secretariat, or alternatively the International Council (IC), concentrate all “powers to legislate and execute” within the WSF (Della Cava, 2002)? To what extent can the WSF develop a consistent democratic organisational structure that surpasses the current opacity of its decision making processes? Will the WSF values of solidarity, justice and equality remain the core of the organising programme or will the tactical urgency prevail over them? Are the Indian, African and other activists going to autonomously pursue the development of the WSF in their regions causing the final fragmentation of the WSF movement and the loss of its political strength? The final chapter will draw the conclusions of this work.



## **Chapter 2. The Origins of the WSF**

The Indian instantiation of the WSF, WSF2004, provided the unique opportunity to form a national alliance between actors who had not ever engaged with each other in their pursuit for radical social change and in their struggles against neoliberalism (Chandhoke, 2002; Tandon and Mohanty, 2003). An alliance full of contradictions and conflicts, yet an alliance that constituted the first embryo of an important new actor in the Indian Civil Society (ICS). Never before NGOs, single issue movements and mass organisations linked to the communist parties had worked together in India. In this chapter I analyse the process that lead from the inception of the WSF to its move to India. The introduction in India of the WSF discourse and the mobilising ability and leadership skills of some of the leaders of WSF India, started a process that promises to widen considerably the size and the scope of ICS and to give a new (or renewed) political scope to its actions. On a wider scale, the WSF India process constitutes a cornerstone for the construction of a powerful global counter-hegemonic alliance against neoliberalism.

This chapter is divided into 4 sections: I first discuss the historical roots of the WSF and its links to political and social struggles around the globe going back at least 4 decades. Then I detail the evolution of the WSF movement in Brazil, from its inception to the moment it was decided to export the framework to Asia to make of it a fully global initiative. The third section discusses the political context

of the ICS and its idiosyncrasies. The fourth section focuses on the strategies of translation and adoption of the WSF framework into the Indian context and discusses the aspirations and political investment that the Indian organisers made on the WSF format when organising the rehearsal event to WSF2004, the first Asian Social Forum (ASF2003). In this section I analyse the complexities and the contradictions that exploded along the way of the WSF India process in the first year or so of its existence and that manifested themselves at the January 2003 event in Hyderabad. Ingrained behaviours clashed with new discourses and old mentalities with new political and organisational structures and tools: the product of those clashes and conflicts was nonetheless a very successful political process which confirmed the ability of the WSF to help consolidate national counter-hegemonic alliances and create the opportunity to build transnational and even global ones. This set the scene for the more challenging process that lead to WSF2004.

## **1. History of the WSF**

The WSF was born in Brazil in 2000 (Whitaker, 2005), but the necessary conditions were of much broader scope than the Brazilian *milieu* (Corbyn, 2004) and were determined by the global political dimension of the protest against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, dictatorship and war with roots in the 60s (Sen, 2005; Whitaker et al., 2006; Santos, 2003; Toshimaru, 2005;

Sansonetti, 2002) and earlier (Wallerstein, 2004)<sup>29</sup>. Much of the knowledge built in those struggles contributed to generate the primordial broth from which the sparkle given by the Brazilian activists catalysed the birth of the WSF. Although it is not possible here to discuss all the traditions that led to the WSF<sup>30</sup>, it is nonetheless necessary to briefly mention four different streams (Glasius and Timms, 2006) which converged in the WSF: anti-colonial struggles; socialist and communist movements<sup>31</sup>; parallel NGOs forums to the UN conferences of the 1990s<sup>32</sup>; and the more recent alter-globalisation movement (Correa Leite, 2003; Seone and Taddei, 2001 and 2002; Houtart and Polet, 2000) on which I focus in what follows. All these streams (Abreu, 2003) converged in a moment of crisis of neoliberalism (linked, among other things, to the Asian financial crisis) to generate a great global movement (Biccum, 2005).

A crucial role in shaping the global imaginary of the activists against neoliberalism, was played by the Mexican Zapatistas who provided them with a set of discursive tools, largely used later in the WSF, distilled into a set of very striking messages that soon excited and inspired activists the world over. Moreover, and crucially, the closeness of their language to the Latin American

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<sup>29</sup> It is possible to draw a direct line from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the WSF: this connection is not only genealogical, but refers to the features of the spaces created. Hayden writes about the WSF that "its heritage lies in the solidarity movements originally created by Karl Marx long before Marxism was institutionalized" (2004). Marx and Engels helped form a transnational network, the "Society of Fraternal Democrats". They next formed the Communist Correspondence Societies. Finally, they wrote the Manifesto and formed the League of Communists, in 1848. "These first networks were premised on discussion rather than explicit programs, so that space would exist for participants to 'clear things up among themselves' as Marx wrote" (Hayden, 2004; see also Marx and Engels, 1848). For a more detailed investigation on the history of anti-systemic movements see Arrighi et al., 1989.

<sup>30</sup> For Sen (2005) we will have to go as far back as the French revolution and its formulation of universal rights.

<sup>31</sup> Seoane and Taddei consider the WSF an international convergence that follows the trend of the past Internationals (2002:117).

<sup>32</sup> See Pianta 2001 and 2005 and Tabbush, 2005.

milieu in which the WSF was born and to the European activists who provided the indispensable strategic support to the birth of the WSF, made of the Zapatistas' uprising the mythical origin (Rangan, 2000) of the WSF by also, though, partially displacing them from their own local and indigenous genealogy to provide the mythical ancestor to a whole global movement (Harvey, 2000)<sup>33</sup>. The Zapatistas have endowed the movement that later created the WSF with three fundamental conceptual pillars: the proposition of the fundamental importance of "the community" as the space in which reciprocal responsibility forms the individual in a radically different way from the individualism of the neoliberal world<sup>34</sup>; the struggle against neoliberalism as epistemological struggle (Pollack, 1999; Santos, 2005) against the annihilation of the fundamental diversity that creates the cultural ecology of the world; and a different understanding of power: according to the Zapatistas, what matters to social movements is not power, but the fight for the freedom of choice of indigenous people (Esteva, 1999; Holloway, 2002).

One further fundamental strategic formulation, widely used in the WSF context, referred to the understanding of the complementarity of social and political struggles constructed by the Zapatistas. According to them, the possibility to replicate their struggle everywhere does not exist. Any marginalized group of

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<sup>33</sup> The Zapatista lesson was not fully embraced by all in the WSF. Its contradictory role is exemplified by the following passage from Stedile (2002), leader of the MST and member of the BOC. "Our relations with the Zapatistas are simply those of solidarity. Their struggle is a just one, but its social base and its method are different to ours. Theirs is, at root, a struggle of indigenous peoples for autonomy and if there's a criticism to be made of their experience, it would be that the slowness of their advance is due to their inability to broaden it into a class struggle, a national one. They have accepted the terms of fighting for a specific ethnicity, within a particular territory-whereas ours is a farmers' movement that has been transformed and politicized as a result of the advance of capitalism, of neoliberalism" (see also Stedile, 2007). For a Gramscian analysis of the Zapatista movement along lines consistent with the present analysis see Morton, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Esteva, 1999.

people must find their own strategy in their history: it is impossible to formulate a universal revolutionary strategy. Differences between peoples and groups are more relevant than their social position as oppressed, their struggles must therefore reflect those differences rather than the uniformity of their social position (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Derrida, 1978). Zapatistas' proposals are for a movement as a network of local struggles united against neoliberalism in its local instantiations. These concepts were not new (see among many others Bey, 1991) but they achieved global political resonance thanks to the formidable communication campaign launched by the Zapatistas (Burbach, 2001; Pollack, 1999; Castells, 1997) which made of them the icon of the struggle against neoliberalism.

The Internet helped the Zapatistas reach out to Latin America, Europe and beyond and inspire the creation of a wide network of activists against neoliberalism (Martin-Torres, 2001)<sup>35</sup>. In 1996 the First Intercontinental Meeting for Humanity and Against Neo-Liberalism took place in Chiapas. Several thousand participants from 100 countries discussed a world free from neocolonialism, neoliberalism and US unilateralism. The second meeting was held the following year in Spain. The third took place in Brazil in December 1998. When that meeting took place, one of the most important actors of the global movement had already been created as direct outcome of the Zapatistas Intercontinental Meetings, the People's Global Action (PGA), (Juris, 2004; Routledge, 2005).

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<sup>35</sup> If the Internet contributed vastly to establishing global networks of activists (Waterman, 2003d and 2004; Castells, 1997; Juris, 2004 and 2005) at the same time it forced many other movements to the marginality of the dis-connected world. The WSF is at this level exclusionary, as cyberspace does not represent a completely different social and cultural space than the real world: it is predominantly white, middle class and male.

Contemporary to PGA, in 1998 another organisation that will play a seminal role in the WSF was founded in France in the framework of protests against MAI. Reporting a thorough work conducted on MAI by the lawyer Lori Wallach, associated to the “Public Citizen” movement lead by Ralph Nader in the USA, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, in June 1998, gave the initiative to create ATTAC (Cassen, 2003)<sup>36</sup>. Its main objective was to campaign for a drastic slowing down of the liberalisation of financial markets that had lead to the disastrous crisis in Asia (Cassen, 2003 and 2003b). The newly created networks, called for a massive demonstration against the WTO to take place at the end of 1999 (Juris, 2004 and Forthcoming; Seoane and Taddei, 2001 and 2002; Kaldor, 2000; Halliday, 2000; Scholte, 2000; Gill, 2000). The response from grassroots, direct action activists and the most important trade unions created a formidable alliance. Between November 30<sup>th</sup> and December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1999, about 40000 people protested in Seattle<sup>37</sup>. The demonstration was the biggest in the US after the protests against the Vietnam War. Its success was stunning: the WTO meeting had to dissolve without concluding its agenda<sup>38</sup>. Beyond the contingent success, it was remarkable that social and political actors with many different backgrounds (Halliday, 2000) found a way to make a strength of their differences. The uniqueness of this social and political blend created the foundations for the WSF.

After Seattle, every following demonstration against the global institutional

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<sup>36</sup> Action for a Tax on Financial Transaction to Aid Citizens.

<sup>37</sup> In August 1999, in India, PGA called for an international meeting to prepare for Seattle.

<sup>38</sup> Some curb considerably the enthusiasm of the activists about the success of their actions: see Scholte, 2000b.

framework of neoliberalism gathered a growing number of activists and support came even from traditionally moderate sectors of civil society. The protests followed in rapid succession: in Washington, against World Bank and IMF in April 2000; Okinawa, in July 2000 against the G8; Prague in September against WB and IMF; Nice against the EU Summit (Juris, 2004, Seoane and Taddei 2001 and 2002, Lipschutz, 2005 and 2006), yet the symbolic target that the movement chose, in the process that lead to the convergence in the WSF, was not the IMF or the WB and not even the WTO, but the WEF, which was, according to the global activists, the place where the theory and ideology of world domination by capital met their implementers<sup>39</sup>.

In January 2001, parallel to the WEF, in Porto Alegre, 15,000 participants from 122 countries met for the first WSF. But the season of the enormous demonstrations was not yet over: in April, the representatives of 34 American countries met in Quebec to discuss and establish a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and over 30,000 protesters took part to the "March of the People"<sup>40</sup>. In June, violent clashes occurred in Gothenburg during the EU summit. The reaction of the police officers against the 25,000 demonstrators was disproportionate and three demonstrators were wounded by gunshots. Ten days after the clashes in Gothenburg, the meeting of the World Bank in Barcelona was cancelled on threat of demonstrations. In July, the meeting of the G8 was held in Genoa in an almost deserted city oppressed by security measures trying to

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<sup>39</sup> Mount Pelerin, where the foundations of neoliberalism as a political philosophical doctrine were built by Hayek and his associates is not far from Davos.

<sup>40</sup> For the first time the police played heavy handed against the demonstrators starting a race towards the fatal events of Genoa 2001: tear gas and rubber pellets were shot against the activists.

emphasise the dangerousness of the demonstrators, stigmatised as terrorists and criminals. This escalation of anxiety and frustration lead to the killing of Carlo Giuliani by a Carabinieri: he was marching with 250,000 activists. In January 2002, the second WSF met in Brazil: the Intercontinental Youth Camp (IYC) of the WSF was named after Carlo.

This brief chronology traces some of the currents leading to the WSF: the local protest in Chiapas that lead to the foundation of PGA, the creation of ATTAC, the demonstrations of late 90s and early 2000s (Marcon and Pianta, 2002). What has not yet been discussed is the fundamental thrust exerted by the Brazilian activists. It was Oded Grajew and Francisco Whitaker who had the idea to hold a convention against the WEF (Whitaker, 2001). They discussed in February 2000 this idea with Bernard Cassen<sup>41</sup> who enthusiastically agreed to give his support. Back in Brazil, Grajew and Whitaker organised a meeting in Sao Paulo (Whitaker, 2001), where delegates of 8 organisations signed the Cooperation Agreement to organise the first meeting of the WSF<sup>42</sup>. These organisations represented the main souls of the Brazilian civil society, which, in decades of struggles against dictatorship had learnt to set aside ideological differences when it came to fight against a ruthless enemy. That experience and the decades long practice provided the practical infrastructure to organise a WSF and constituted one of its ideological pillars.

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<sup>41</sup> Director of Le Monde Diplomatique and president of ATTAC.

<sup>42</sup> Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (ABONG); ATTAC; Brazilian Justice & Peace Commission (CBJP); Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship (CIVES); Central Trade Union Federation (CUT); Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Studies (IBASE); Centre for Global Justice (CJG); Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST).



The representative of the organising committee then, discussed with the authorities of Porto Alegre and the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Whitaker, 2001) the possibility to organise the event in the capital of the Brazilian South. Both the mayor of Porto Alegre and the governor of the state were members of the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores – Workers Party) to which the majority of the activists involved in the WSF organisation were looking for representation (Hayden, 2004). The following move, suggested by Cassen, was sending a delegation in late June to Geneva where a large number of organisations were taking part to the activities of the Copenhagen +5 summit (Whitaker, 2001; Pianta, 2001; Marcon and Pianta 2002; Pianta 2005). From that moment with the support of an international group the logistics of the first edition of the WSF were tackled with energy and enthusiasm.

The success of the first WSF went beyond any imagination of the initiators and provoked a vortex of debate and a set of precipitous decisions to give the forum a more stable structure. In the following month an International Council (IC) was constituted and a Charter of Principles approved to define the boundaries of the WSF open space and its values and vision of a better world. The following year the second edition of the WSF took place again in Porto Alegre and attracted an impressive 50,000 participants. The organisational structure was further consolidated and an important move towards the globalisation of the WSF was made: the expansion of the WSF at the regional and national level through regional, national and local social forums alongside with thematic forums on issues crucial to the movement. Following those decisions continental meetings

were held with unexpected success in Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, Florence, Cartagena, and Hyderabad. In Florence, in November 2002, 60,000 people participated to the activities of the European forum, and an astonishing million marched to protest against the war on Iraq.

Confirming the expanding trend of the WSF global events, the third edition of the WSF in 2003 in Porto Alegre saw the participation of above 100,000 participants from 131 countries. WSF2003 marked a crucial moment in the evolution of the WSF: it was then that the decision to move the forum to India was taken to fully legitimise the global scope of the WSF. The decision taken in January started a thorough process of negotiation of ideology, organisational culture and political expectations with the Indian organisers, and it deepened the process of reflection among Brazilian and European activists on the scope and potentialities of the forum. The outcomes of the process of reflection conducted by the original organisers were shared with the Indians in February. The document highlighted the main issues of the WSF and proposed some considerations on the possible future directions of the process. In that document was highlighted that “there are complex operational problems and difficulties arising from the collective appropriation of the WSF method”<sup>43</sup>.

It is not only the appropriation of the language that is causing problems within the WSF. In fact, “the mere existence of an entity with the characteristics of the IC places some structural difficulties”<sup>44</sup>. Working on so many different local and

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<sup>43</sup> The Directions of the WSF Process”, unpublished.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

global processes is tiring for the members of the IC and the lack of representation within that body adds to their concerns. The necessary steps to tackle these fundamental shortcomings had to be coordinated with activists from all regions of the planet starting with the Indian organisers of the next world meeting. The call for the expansion of the structure is followed by that for a crucial consolidation of the organisational culture of the WSF: “We need to work on a non-hierarchical representation scheme, different from the traditional one (...) with the purpose to keep the WSF character of an open process”<sup>45</sup>. Alongside the assessment of the IC one on the Brazilian Secretariat was conducted. The outcome is synthesised thus: “The fast expansion of the internationalization has meant that many times we were surpassed by the events; the Brazilian electoral process affected the organizations included in the Secretariat; the event in Porto Alegre has grown dramatically this year, and demanded political investments that had to be organized with lesser local resources; information was not always passed to the IC with the necessary agility”<sup>46</sup>. What is interesting in the passages reported above is the awareness of the impossibility to structure the WSF in a fully efficient way in order to keep up with the pace of history. In that constant inadequacy the creative energy of the WSF finds its full expression. The move to India fully exposed those complexities and potentialities by adding the political experience of movements and activists that ground their roots in the independence movement of that country dating mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and that more recently have engaged in a strenuous struggle against the Indian neoliberal turn from the late 80s onwards.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

## **2. Moving to India.**

The choice of India was almost obliged given the role of India as a rising superpower, an atomic country, one of the fastest growing economies of the planet and a country with a remarkable (albeit contradictory at times) democratic record and the size, multiplicity and exuberance of its civil society. Moreover, India has been often described as a success story of economic liberalisation. However, since very early in the process of liberalisation of the Indian economy an intense web of protests took place in India targeting the central government and its policies vis-à-vis international organisations like WB and the IMF (Waterman, 2003; Shah, 2004). The WB in particular had been target in India of the great movement against the dams on the river Narmada (Waterman, 2004; Kothari, 2000; Khagram, 2000). Towards the end of the 90's the protests against genetic modified crops and their effects on Indian farmers produced the joining of the global and the local campaigners: in 1999 in Bangalore a massive demonstration took place called by Via Campesina (the biggest global activist network) and PGA (Pattenden, 2005). Although intense, the opposition to neoliberalism in India did not create a convergence of the organisations and movements of the antagonist civil society. Although the networking process with the global activist built lasting partnerships between Indian and European or American activists, the civil society in India persisted highly fragmented and traversed by often strong conflicts.

Moving was necessary for the WSF. A fourth edition in Porto Alegre would have

confirmed the criticisms against the parochialism of some WSF activists, exposing nationalism and political opportunism where it was expected to be banned. Keeping the WSF in Brazil would have made of the WSF a bureaucratic affair and obliterated all pretension of the WSF to be truly global. At the events in Porto Alegre from 2001 to 2003, barely few hundred participants had joined from Asia and Africa. Moreover, even with all the due stress to the paramount importance of the WSF process over the WSF events, both Africa and Asia had no WSF processes with exclusion of a couple of shy attempts made in Africa. The decision to move to India was a contested one and even after the decision was taken, a lot of anxiety circulated within the inner circles of WSF organisers and supporters.

The process that culminated in Mumbai in January 2004, started during the IC meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2002<sup>47</sup>, where a tentative decision was taken to host WSF2004 in India after a regional forum perhaps in December 2002<sup>48</sup>. The definitive decision to move the Forum to India was taken after the success of the ASF in India<sup>49</sup>. The ASF took place in Hyderabad in January 2003 and its success confirmed the ability of the Indians to organise WSF2004. As expressed in the document by the title mentioned above: “[the internationalisation of the WSF] took place with a unity of method and without fragmentation. We are now promoting contacts among different political cultures, a move that strengthens the capabilities of the WSF process to establish dialogues with specific realities and a

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<sup>47</sup> WSF IS, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> Even during WSF2001 the desire of the BOC was strong not to hold WSF2002 in Brazil (Sader, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> WSF India, 2002b.

growing diversity of processes”<sup>50</sup>. The arguments of the heated debate that preceded the final decision can be grouped along three main foci:

- the necessity for the Forum to pursue its process of expansion to involve crucial areas of the world and, by exposing itself to new political cultures, deal in a more constructive way with issues alien to the Brazilian context such as casteism and communal politics;
- the ability of the WSF framework to initiate a process of consolidation of the fragmented ICS;
- The doubts about, on one side, removing the WSF from Latin America where its presence was strongly needed and, on the other, the difficulties of organising such a mass process/event in a country where sectarian politics was so strong and where there was no governmental support.

On the first point, supported by the initiators of the WSF and by the same BOC, the several arguments in favour of the move referred to the need to globalise the WSF process (el Saadawi, 2003) and give it full geographical representation (Teivainen, 2003), especially in order to reinforce the cooperation between African and Asian activists who were the least represented in the previous WSFs and inhabited the poorest areas of the planet<sup>51</sup>. Others argued that moving was also necessary to avoid bureaucratisation and the consolidation of the European-Brazilian leadership of the forum (Tartakowsky, 2003; Stetten and Steinhilber,

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<sup>50</sup> WSF IS, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> “The WSF process must reach out in a larger way to the African-Asian region, where two-thirds of the world’s population lives”. (WSF India, 2003). On the contribution of the Africans to WSF2004 see Mutasa, 2004.

2004; Callinicos, 2004). Moreover, the choice of Mumbai was perfect as a location that fully exposed the inherent contradictions of globalisation and the inequalities that it exacerbates (Stetten and Steinhilber, 2004; Vanaik, 2004). More strategic reasons were also mentioned in the debate like those referring to the geopolitical relevance of India: these reasons were highlighted by Whitaker (Simonson, 2004) with reference to India's status as member of the G3 with Brazil and South Africa. One more reason to move the focus of the forum on Asia was the imminent (when the final decision was negotiated) attack on Iraq. While the ethical reason to enlarge inclusion of marginalised sectors of the world population was strong, stronger was the strategic reason to fully legitimise the WSF as a world movement and to enhance its political bargaining power against neoliberalism.

On the second point, the strategic importance of organising a WSF in India did not escape the initiators of WSF India. The WSF could have provided the double chance, if appropriately managed, to start "a historic process of galvanising all those who are affected by and are questioning the impact of neoliberal, capitalist globalisation in the country. It further provides the opportunity to build organic linkages with similar organisations, movements, and individuals across the globe"<sup>52</sup>. Moreover, the nature and values of the WSF could frame the linking processes in India in an open and inclusive manner providing therefore the necessary environment to fully develop a meaningful dialogue between as vast a number as possible of actors of civil society. There will also be the chance for the

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<sup>52</sup> WSF India, 2002. See also WSF India, 2002b.

Indian activists to relate and negotiate their cultural, social and political specificities<sup>53</sup> with a wide set of global activists enhancing therefore their connections to the wider network of dissent against neoliberalism that the WSF helped consolidate. Furthermore, and most importantly for some, the WSF could constitute the first blossom of a strong political actor at a national level.

The resistance to the decision to move the forum to India was vigorously articulated. Although opposed by only few of the members of the IC<sup>54</sup>, more subtle doubts were expressed by many on the ability of the Indians to organise a WSF, given their fragmented and sectarian politics. These doubts were openly expressed at times and reached India<sup>55</sup>, other times they remained subterranean and contributed to an atmosphere of mild mistrust and separation between the Brazilian and European core of the WSF and the Indian activists. Other more practical concerns were expressed in relation to the hostility, or at best

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<sup>53</sup> "WSF, 2004 would not be an Indianized replica of Porto Alegre. In India many groups have expressed the need to innovate on the present structure of the WSF process, while retaining its essence. Thus, WSF2004 has adopted as its principle focus opposition not just against imperialist globalization, but also against communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism), casteism and patriarchy" (WSF India, 2002c). See also the invitation for the Gujarat SF (2003): "From the widespread social response to devastating earthquake to extreme sectarian violence of unprecedented scale [Gujarat] represents the contradiction of a traditional society drawn into the vortex of the twin processes namely; globalization and nation building taking place simultaneously. At this juncture the Gujarati society is seeking to redefine its identity and clarify its interests. For this to happen, social and civil society movements need a space for dialogue and negotiation so that the best of Gujarat's tradition and liberal spirit gets translated into a modern identity, ethos and values of a democratic, secular and socially just human fabric".

<sup>54</sup> IOC list, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2003: "the strongest opposition to moving to India came from the Cubans. (...) they saw the WSF as an important window to the outside world, as an opportunity to reach out when they are being barricaded from all sides. (...) they saw the WSF as an important forum to oppose the signing of the FTAA in 2005. It was, in part, this concern expressed by the Cubans that led to the decision that the WSF would come back to Porto Alegre in 2005."

<sup>55</sup> ASF list, February 2003: "There are real concerns about limitations and weaknesses inside India and among the organisers and broader social/people's/mass movements that need to be addressed. Many of these concerns could be addressed in the short-run even if those who are actually immersed in them might be less optimistic".



indifference, of the Mumbai local government and more in general of the central government of India in the hands of precisely those neoliberal right wing groups mostly challenged by the participants of the forum (Teivainen, 2004). Later in the process a concern for the security of the participants started preoccupying many. Mumbai was hit by a series of blasts<sup>56</sup> and some groups received threats from Hindu fundamentalists. The organisers reassured everyone and provided a secure environment for the activities of the forum.

### **3. Indian Scenario**

To fully appreciate the relevance of the WSF in India<sup>57</sup> I will discuss the main features of the political terrain, Indian Civil Society, in which it rooted itself<sup>58</sup> and how that terrain has been shaped by years of fragmented political struggle under the spell of diffidence and open confrontation. Independent India has seen, after 1947, developing a vibrant, creative and often confrontational range of social movements (Raina, 2004; Shah, 2004) that opposed, complemented or were instrument of the massive Indian post-independence development plan and were built on the foundations of the independence movement. Indian development and

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<sup>56</sup> At the February 2004 IOC meeting, was highlighted that the IOC had the crucial strength to resist the pressure from the international allies concerned about the blasts and the specific complexities of the Indian environment. This was mentioned with great pride by many IOC members who congratulated each other for the proof of political and organisational maturity given to the world (personal notes).

<sup>57</sup> Tarrow stresses the importance to fully understand culture and the history of movements in order to understand the way in which each component presents its own analysis of the conjuncture, makes its claims and proposes relevant changes (1994). See also Escobar, 2001. For Smith is necessary "an understanding of the forum not as a timeless, global unitary sphere but one that is variegated and closely related to time and place" (2004b:11).

<sup>58</sup> In his work on Bali Barth (1993) analyses the complexities of the Balinese culture moving beyond the debate unity/fragmentation and exploring the cross-fertilising role of the exchanges between different cultural traditions within the framework of the Balinese culture.

the Indian attitude towards the global scenario changed in 1991 with the choice to liberalise its market. The chain of consequences generated reverberated through social and political movements in the intense politics played from then onwards. The dynamics of those politics are fully represented in the WSF. The sectarian disputes of the fragmented progressive civil society could not be quickly recomposed and the disputes continued between Communist parties, trade unions, new social movements, mass movements linked to the Communist parties, NGOs, and grassroots organisations. The WSF suffered of those conflicts, but it also offered a new instrument to successfully start recomposing those fractures (Kumar, 2000:16).

The struggles against neoliberal globalisation started in India in the late 80s<sup>59</sup> in opposition to the Dunkel Draft, named after the then GATT's Director General. The main opposition was animated by left parties and organizations and some peasant movements. Along with GATT, the Bretton Woods organizations catalysed the activities of an over increasing range of groups and movements opposed to the neoliberal prescriptions forced on India (Sinha, 2002 and 2003). The activities of these groups led to the one million strong demonstration organized in Delhi in 1994 where activists from all over India contrasted what they perceived as a surrendering by India of its economic sovereignty to GATT, WB and IMF. The mobilisation spread quickly to the whole country and regional and sectoral coalitions (focusing on specific issues such as health, education, agriculture, etc.) were formed but an all India coalition could not be convened<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> WSF India, 2002b.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The WSF was thought of as the missing instrument to form a country wide coalition against neoliberalism and, the other fundamental issue for Indian activists, religious sectarianism<sup>61</sup>.

The Bhopal Document (representing the political guidelines of WSF India<sup>62</sup>) assessed the possible reasons of the lack of success of the Indian movements against neoliberalism and religious sectarianism. The reason “is not a lack of numbers but a lack of cohesiveness, in turn based on a lack of mutual understanding and trust, and through this, of even tactical unity”. The WSF can contribute to bridge this gap and offer itself as “a process that allows all of us to come together, to hear and understand each other, to explore areas of common interest, and also our differences, and to learn from the experiences and struggles of people in other countries”. This “could be a vital first step towards different kinds of unity and alternatives which are essential to the task of outflanking the growing forces of the neo-fascist right”. The convergence catalysed by the “open space” has allowed an exchange of ideas and the creation of new alliances and strategic partnerships unprecedented in India.

The complexities of the Indian scenario are such that a comprehensive review of the movements that populate it is impossible here. I attempt in the following paragraphs to briefly account for the main streams of ICS. A crucial role both in the struggle for independence and later in independent India<sup>63</sup> was played by

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> see WSF India, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> In independent India the most prominent Gandhian movements were the *sarvodaya* movement that struggled for the redistribution of land and the *Panchayati Raj*, for local governance at the

Gandhi and his followers. Centred on the notion of self-reliance Gandhian politics is symbolized by the hand-spun cloth, the *khadi*, and built around the concept of *satyagraha*, the truth, for which Gandhi struggled applying his strictly non-violent methods (Parel, 1997). Gandhian thought deeply influenced Indian politics and made its authority heard on questions such as governance and decentralization, education, economy and development, caste and ethical issues. Gandhi's politics, notwithstanding the importance and the role played in the independence struggle, met harsh opposition mainly from the Dalit sector, who harshly accused Gandhi of patronizing behaviour with respect to caste issues instead of recognising full social and political rights to the lower caste. The Dalits recognise Ambedkar as their true leader (Shah, 2003). Dalit activists managed to extend their influence so far as to get to power in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But their success notwithstanding, the Dalit movement is traversed by deep ruptures that produced several currents in contrast with each other.

Gandhi faced criticism also from the traditional left because he never made reference to class issues as causes of the oppressions of the majority of peasants and workers in India. Although the important role played in India by socialism (in its Nehruvian version) and the influence of class politics in its social struggles, more and more the polarisation of movements took place along lines of caste, religion and ethnicity (Raina, 2004:7). However, three main Communist Parties flourished in India (them also victims of numerous successive fractures): each has a set of associated movements: a union, a peasant movement, a women's

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village level (Raina, 2004).

movement and a student/youth movement (Shah, 2004). These movements are not fully autonomous and their politics is influenced by the positioning of the parent party: when this is in power the activity of the movements loses its character of opposition and social critique.

Of the independent movements that flourished in the 70s and after, some reached international relevance such as the Chipko Andolan (Rangan, 2000) and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Kothari, 2000; Khagram, 2000). They produced some of the most controversial and respected characters of the WSF such as Medha Patkar (also a member of the IC). These movements struggled for the livelihood of people threatened by development policies taken at the central level that imposed natural resources management processes that did not take into consideration the needs of those who with those resources have been connected for generations, be those resources trees or water. Both those movements have great notoriety and influence in India and abroad and they have been at the centre of heated political and academic debate: the work of Vandana Shiva (associated with the Chipko Andolan) has been a crucial reference of the debate on post-development; Anrundathi Roy (associated to the NBA) has risen to a great notoriety both for her literary work and her provocative political speeches.

One of the crucial consequences of neoliberalism at the global level has been to increase labour flexibility and reduce job security and salaries (Bloom, 2000; Kiely, 2003 and 2005; Silver and Arrighi, 2000). Workers all over the world have paid dear the implementation of those neoliberal policies and the related

repression of the struggling trade unions. Trade unions have therefore become among the strongest souls of the WSF movement as they were of the alter-globalisation movement which converged in the WSF<sup>64</sup>. The labour movement in India, instead, is only marginally able to reach the huge work force of the country (Raina, 2004), especially Dalits or Adivasi (Shah, 2004). The consequence of the inability of the unions to organise across ethnic and caste issues forced workers and unemployed to join the ranks of environmental, indigenous, gender, religious, caste and peasant movements. It is important to mention also that it is estimated that in India there are something like 200,000 NGOs (Raina, 2004), part of them gathering and expressing the energy of those activists that found themselves restrained by inflexible hierarchies or political manifestos in more traditional organisations. Some NGOs are Gandhian in inspiration, small in size and rooted in the local social fabric, some other reached considerable size and are heavily funded by foreign agencies. The role of these last is being criticised by many activists and by the Communist parties who accused them to wash away, with their assistance, the sense of necessity that the oppressed need to rebel (Karat, 1988). Moreover, their international networks and allegiances, it is maintained, make that their strategic choices cannot be consistent with those of the more India oriented activists. This position has been partially mitigated recently but the tension between party, mass organisations and NGOs is still very strong and played a crucial role in the organisational process of WSF2004 creating at times furious conflicts.

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<sup>64</sup> The alliance between trade unions and direct action groups constituted the strong backbone that sustained the actions of the activists during the battle of Seattle (Juris, 2004; Seoane and Taddei, 2001 and 2002).

One of the most important social movements in India, since before Independence is the Dalit movement (Shah, 2001). According to the Hindu division of society in caste, these are positioned in a scale related to their degree of purity (Raina, 2004). The Dalits are placed at the bottom of this hierarchy and for this relegated to the most degrading occupations and often banned from common water sources, public places or temples. Against this unbearable state of things the Dalit leader and leader of the Constituent Assembly of India Ambedkar mobilised great masses of Dalits across the country. His role in the writing process of the new Indian constitution made sure that untouchability was made illegal. However, notwithstanding several campaigns along the years, the promulgation in 1989 of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and the political victories of the Dalits especially in the North, both the government and the police have been too often implicated in cases of systemic marginalisation and abuse of the Dalit population. It was due to the repeated abuses that the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) was founded in 1998. The role of NCDHR was central in WSF2004. At the centre of their campaigning there are two enemies: *Hindutva* pursued by Hindu fundamentalist movements that, referring to the hierarchy of purity, would force Dalits to marginalisation, and neoliberal globalisation considered the cause of increased impoverishment of the most vulnerable sectors of society. The Dalit movements managed in years that preceded the WSF India process, to project themselves into the global arena by establishing important international links with other organisations fighting for the rights of the most marginalised groups of the world (Vera-Zavala, 2004; Moliner, 2004). The apex of that politics of global networking was represented by the

Durban conference on Race in 2001 (Moliner, 2004)

One of the most unique movements that the Indian social fabric has produced is the People's Science Movement which deserves a brief mention here. Started in the late 60s it has involved around 300,000 professionals and scientist in a process of taking scientific knowledge to the level of the local communities in order to empower them and to bridge the knowledge gap among Indians. The role of that movement and its descendants were central in the WSF India process. Another actor of great relevance is the National Alliance of People's Movements. NAPM is a network of around two hundred social movements (Swain, 1997) from all over India that struggle to resist the transformative path of development by putting forward alternative socio-economic, political and cultural paths that are environmentally and socially sustainable (NAPM, 2007). NAPM addresses issues ranging from caste and untouchability, to gender and patriarchy, social justice, human rights, religious discrimination and communal politics and strongly advocates against imperialism and global domination by capital. In a campaign document produced by NAPM in occasion of WSF2004 and aimed at the foreign activists, the NAPM is presented in the following words:

NAPM is a coming together, a process of like-minded groups and movements who while retaining their autonomous identities, are working together to bring the struggle for a people-oriented development model to the centre-stage of politics and public life. (...) uses mass mobilization along with advocacy lobbying and networking with like minded groups to achieve these ends. NAPM (...) attempts to link between the struggling rural masses, urban civil society, labourers students and intelligentsia. Within its structure, it aims at a democratic functioning and also



consensus-based decision-making (unpublished).

It is interesting to note how the language of this brief text resonates with the discourse of the WSF. NAPM was started as an initiative of some of the biggest and most important Indian social movements: Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), National Federation of Fish Workers (NFF), Samajwadi Jan Parishad, and Chipko Andolan. All these movements had the chance to engage intensely with the global community of activists and contributed to the creation of that milieu in which the WSF discourse was elaborated. The capacity to mobilise vast masses in protests and campaigns has been demonstrated since the inception of the Alliance. Important campaigning and struggles of NAPM include the famous fight against the Coca-Cola accused of appropriating water belonging to a village community in Kerala and in Plachimada (near Varanasi) (NAPM, 2006; Drew and Levien, 2006), for land rights in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, for farm workers rights in Andhra Pradesh and against communalism in Uttar Pradesh, for the rights of fishworkers in Kerala (Sinha, 2002 and 2003)<sup>65</sup>.

Alongside the direct struggles, the movements of the NAPM have engaged in fundamental experiments conducted to propose viable alternatives to replace exploitative technologies and systems of productions with productive units based on cooperation, local resources, and sustainable energy production. They have set up small and medium scale schooling experiments with a stress on vernacular education, sustainable agriculture to fight against government policies that

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<sup>65</sup> Informations on all these campaigns and many others are available at the NAPM website: <http://www.napmindia.org/>

challenge food security, alternative provision of health for those who are cut out from the national provision due to the privatization process taking place in India, reconstruction of local community based productive industries (along the Gandhian *khadi* idea), to engage directly with WTO tyranny in the market place. These wide ranging activities are collaged to challenge directly capitalism. Gandhi's influence is central for many NAPM movements, especially when it comes to challenge military and religious sovereignty, as sought by the right wing Indian government of the 90s in places like Kashmir and Gujarat. In this fertile and complex ground the WSF India put roots: at first with some difficulty later more confidently and in depth. In the next paragraph I discuss the first phase of the WSF India process.

#### **4. The Asian Social Forum**

The introduction to India of the WSF was linked to the global mobilisation of the previous decade: the Seattle<sup>66</sup> struggle considered one of the most important victories of the anti-neoliberalism movement and those that followed against G8, WB, EU, were linked with Indian and Asian manifestations of the same wave of protests (Seoane and Taddei, 2002). The following strategy was to show to the prospective participants to the WSF India how some key issues unified all

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<sup>66</sup> "The Seattle protests against WTO was perhaps the defining moment in the birth of WSF. The second important milestone was the protests in Genoa in July 2001, where the Genoa SF played a critical role and later helped develop into the ESF. Various groups around the world were increasingly feeling the need that without global networks, it could not push back the offensive of global capital. Local actions, while extremely important, was not enough. Increasingly, groups used as occasions to come together in mass protests events connected to the institutions of imperialist globalisation: WTO, World Bank, IMF, G8". IOC list, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2003.

progressive activists of the country: the common enemies were neoliberalism, war, communalism, religious sectarianism, casteism, war. The WSF was, in the mind of the first Indian organisers, to create the opportunity to meet, celebrate differences and consolidate the anti-neoliberal front beyond those differences<sup>67</sup>. But this process was not devoid of difficulties and conflicts. Strong criticisms were voiced to the WSF from several areas that challenged the possibility of the WSF to achieve what it promised and exposed hegemonic tactical opportunism by some activists who were aiming at exploiting the brand name of the forum to outreach to new audiences. The most recurrent criticisms had to do with the political inequality between the actors involved in the WSF. Parties and NGOs were often accused to monopolise and professionalize the process. Social movements accused the ideological corruption of some of the organisers and cut for themselves spaces at the margins of ASF2003. Women's groups recall the consistent patriarchal practices within the movement and religious groups are discriminated unless they learn how to speak the secular language, or pay their way in as done by some Catholic and Christian movements (see chapter 5).

The organisational process of the first ASF in India started (Sen, 2004b) with a national consultation in December 2001 in Bangalore<sup>68</sup>. The following consultation took place in January in Delhi (Sen, 2004b): the outcome of that consultation was the decision to organise a continental event to test the receptivity of the ICS to this new actor. The Delhi Consultation in January 2002 appointed a

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<sup>67</sup> Ib.: "These groups were heterogeneous: they came from diverse political and social streams, had different historical experiences. It was felt that it was not enough to meet in protests but there was a need for movements to dialogue, share experiences and information and engage with each other".

<sup>68</sup> WSF India, 2004.

convenor for the forthcoming regional forum who took part to WSF2002 where he negotiated the conditions of the Indians to organise a world event. The conditions were accepted and the final decision about the location of WSF2004 was left for a successive decision after ASF2003. Those decisions started the most important political process in recent years in India.

A preparatory meeting for the newly started process took place in Bhopal in April, 2002. That meeting drafted the Bhopal Declaration, which governs WSF India (WSF India, 2002b). Moreover, it was appointed a 23 member Indian Working Committee (IWC). It also decided that the National Consultations (NC), open plenary meetings for the widest number of organisations, were the privileged instrument to ensure a democratic, transparent and accountable decision making mechanism. It established that ASF2003 would be an “open space”: “a mood of sharing experience and of celebrating and dreaming together, while keeping the political focus on struggle against globalisation (imperialism) and the neo-liberal agenda of the world elite”<sup>69</sup>. This ethical and moral commitment to an ‘open space’ was the most significant aspect that the Indian organisers tried to share with the widest number of activists:

This coming together can help all of us to respect differences and still agree to ‘march separately, strike together’ against the resurgent imperialism that neo-liberalism represents – and for building another world, other worlds. (...) This will include consultation meetings across the country, among a wide range of concerned organisations, a massive and widespread process of group discussions among intellectual activists and other concerned people, a massive process of group

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<sup>69</sup> WSF India, 2002d.

discussions among ordinary people at the local level, in villages and towns across the country, *jathas* and caravans, activities within schools and workplaces, etc.<sup>70</sup>.

The ASF event took place in Hyderabad, 2-7 January 2003, and saw the participation of around 20,000 people (800 were non-Indian) representing 900 organisations from 42 countries. The participants took part in 350 seminars, workshops, conferences and panels. The cultural programme saw the attendance of no less than 2000 cultural activists and performers<sup>71</sup>. The central focus of the majority of the events was the resistance to neo-liberal globalisation and the neo-fascist forces, like the Hindu fundamentalist organisations belonging to the Sangh Parivar, gathering strength in India. The most important feature of ASF2003 was to unsettle or at least to challenge some of the most consolidated balances of power within ICS. This generated several critiques as it did the fact that ASF2003 was not fully equipped to fulfil all the promises it made and, in too many aspects, it turned to be widely contradictory. In particular, the activists that animated the process since the very beginning were mostly linked to the CPI-M and to some of its offshoots. Some big NGO officers competed against them and few others risked getting on the way afraid of being crushed in the collisions between those two. The evaluation exercise<sup>72</sup> and the participants' feedback were centred on the following topics: logistics of the event, organisational issues, financial management and information and communication systems, programme, political

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<sup>70</sup> WSF India, 2002b.

<sup>71</sup> WSF India, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> The organisers had little time and energy for this fundamental exercise: the decision taken in Porto Alegre, three weeks after ASF2003, about WSF2004 left no time to take stock of the experience made. What was left of the process to consolidate that experience were mostly personal comments on the organisers' list and some comments that followed report articles published by those who took part in ASF2003 and by professional commentators, and feedback given by some participants.

relevance, learning processes and exchange between different actors, the “open space”.

Notwithstanding the many problems there was a consensus among the commentators on the strategic importance of organising WSF2004 in India. Important exceptions were some of the groups that gave birth to parallel spaces at ASF2003 and that voiced their opposition in several ways outside of it. Some of these groups later joined the WSF2004 process; others remained hostile to that process and joined the alternative forum MR2004<sup>73</sup>.

ASF2003 in the words of many participants was an overwhelming experience (Piron, 2003) that reminded of a huge *mela* (Thekaekara, 2003) and that gave to all participants the embracing feeling of being in a carnival where the feeling of togetherness and profound solidarity made the world disappear in cathartic dances of colours and sounds; this gave confidence in the dream of a better world<sup>74</sup> and courage was given by the empowering feeling of sharing that dream with many others<sup>75</sup>. As Thakaekara writes: “In spite of the chaos there was a tremendous sense of purpose, of urgency, of seriousness and of people coming together and proclaiming their unity, affirming their faith in, their determination to create another world” (2003). However, some saw this energy built within the forum as wasted if not directed towards a specific goal. Activists accused the organisers of seeing the WSF process as an end in itself rather than a means to build another

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<sup>73</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

world<sup>76</sup>. But before addressing these important debates I will briefly review the main concerns around the logistics of the event.

If many organisers and participants agreed that the ASF was logistically a success<sup>77</sup>, severe critiques were voiced about the negative aspects that made difficult if not impossible to attend the programmes one wanted. The main problems reported were the dispersion of the venue in a too vast area of Hyderabad<sup>78</sup>, the lack of adequate transport<sup>79</sup>, the lack of an information system that timely gave news of changes of programmes<sup>80</sup> and consistent maps of the many venues with the indication about how to reach them<sup>81</sup>. All this information should have been supplemented by a set of guidelines for those participants who were not familiar with Hyderabad and India<sup>82</sup> and by a better translation system<sup>83</sup>. If the stress was mainly on the logistics of the event, what was exposed recurrently was the effect of exclusion that logistical shortcomings had: venues too far apart from one another, difficult to find, expensive to reach where public transport was not enough, etc. But exclusion was not only due to logistic inexperience: the organisational structure was often accused of being exclusionary and in collision with the WSF values.

Some aspects referring to the organisational structure were particularly stressed.

The most important critique raised was the permanent unaccountability of the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. See also, Zaidi in Durrani, 2003.

<sup>78</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> ASF list, February 2003. See also Thekaekara, 2003.

<sup>81</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

organisers. In fact, one activist from Manila reports of her frustrating experience with the organising committee: it was often impossible to understand who was dealing with what task and she was left without assistance too many times. She could not even find a clear list of those who were part of the organising committee, which made her experience too dependent on the nice dispositions of those who she happened to meet once in Hyderabad (volunteers, members of the organisation or participants) and in general frustrating and a great waste of time and resources<sup>84</sup>. To these caustic critiques regarding the organisational structure were added those that referred to the financial management accused of not being transparent and of reproducing a pseudo-corporate and authoritarian culture<sup>85</sup>.

The strategy towards the media lacked incisiveness and the necessary attention towards the vernacular press<sup>86</sup>, and the internal communication was not more successful due to the lack of a regular and coordinated exchange of information between the members of the organising committee. This lack of attention to communication as a fundamental tool for inclusion and democracy, made the organisers overlook completely the process of reporting and documenting the whole process. An activist reminds the organisers how fundamental the process of documentation is for the WSF: if ideas and experiences are not archived to be discussed there is no chance for the WSF movement to learn from experience and to start the necessary process of institutional learning<sup>87</sup>. The ASF website was criticised for the problems it created to the registration process and for the lack of

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<sup>84</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



information in it, among which figures first the lack of a consistent directorate of all those who took part in the ASF, which would help considerably the process of networking the ASF was meant to stimulate<sup>88</sup>. The problems with the website were not dealt with by the organisers of the ASF and finally exploded dramatically during WSF2004 (see Chapter 6). An activist remarked that, in order to put together a strong – and coherent with the vision of the Charter – performance, it was necessary to consider a professional management of the 2004 event, at least in some of its aspects<sup>89</sup>. This suggestion exposes a crucial inconsistency within the WSF India process with reference to the participation/efficiency debate which produced interesting exchanges and conflicts in WSF2004 (see Chapter 6).

Another aspect that raised a lot of debate was the programme. With hundreds of events scheduled and dozens happening impromptu at the venues of the ASF and with hundreds of speakers from both activist and academic background, the range of choice was vast and qualified<sup>90</sup>, but the shortcomings were also many. The dispersion<sup>91</sup> of similar events at the venues with consequent duplication<sup>92</sup> due to the lack of coordination<sup>93</sup> in drafting the final programme was a major criticism<sup>94</sup>. Moreover, the design, scheduling and much of the realisation of the programme activities were centralised in the hands of the Indian organisers, so that it would

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> ASF list, January 2003. See also Zaidi in Durrani, (2003).

<sup>91</sup> ASF list, January 2003.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

be a good idea to decentralise<sup>95</sup> some of the programme to make it more collaborative and geographically and politically representative<sup>96</sup>. The imbalance between structured programme and spontaneous events did not allow enough space for alliance building and networking<sup>97</sup>. The inevitable imbalance between celebrity speakers<sup>98</sup> and local activists took away space to those who could benefit more from the "open space" to express their normally unheard concerns<sup>99</sup>. Another issue that echoed a crucial debate within the WSF was linked to the ratio between conferences organised by the organisers and the seminars and workshops organised by the participants<sup>100</sup>. Many, in those days and in the following months, debated this issue exposing the attempt by many to monopolise the attention of the audiences coming to the WSF in order to proselytise them using the big conferences as their main stage.

The debate regarding the political relevance of ASF2003 was intense. It exposed the fundamental ideological differences between those who preferred vanguardist positions and those who favoured deliberative strategies. Many highlighted the uselessness of another talking shop<sup>101</sup>: they stressed that no knowledge<sup>102</sup> was added to that already acquired on the ills of the world, that it made no sense to talk

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. See also Juris, 2004 and forthcoming.

<sup>99</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Kabir, 2003: "All India Peoples Resistance Forum (AIPRF), distributed leaf/booklets among the participants of the Hyderabad conference, arguing: Another world is not possible through debates: Organised resistance is the answer to imperialist globalisation. These arguments, according to AIPRF, "place serious questions on the extent to which the Forum will be able to actually move towards achieving its anti-globalisation goals. The Hyderabad event of ASF is an indication of perfect union of reformist left forces and funded NGOs".

<sup>102</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

to the converted, that a more direct stance should be taken in order to organise the masses into challenging national and international power: action was, according to them, needed to make another world, not hundreds of seminars and workshops<sup>103</sup>. Someone demanded also that WSF2004 be finished with a common declaration and a shared strategy plan<sup>104</sup>; the inability to recompose this debate, generated later the MR2004 process that gathered radical Maoist activists who did not want to abdicate their convictions on ideology and political change.

The majority though, if in different ways and for different motivations, considered ASF2003 a clear success and evidence that Indian and global civil society, and their inter-relations had reached maturity and strength. ASF2003 was expanding the space that civil society had created for itself in India and it was shifting the nature of that space from a conflictual and fractured one to one where actors were showing their will to engage each other in debate<sup>105</sup>. This process had forced also a new debate within the traditional left and the beginning of a dialogue between the traditional left and civil society actors along lines that exposed the potential strategic similarity of their politics. This debate stimulated other important debates on the nature of leadership, political programmes and organisation that can be expected to provide ICS with powerful tactical tools to negotiate convergent goals and instruments to achieve them.

The ability to constitute a privileged forum for strategic alliance building was lucidly exposed: “the ASF uniquely offered four platforms: the first-ever large

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

scale interaction between India's established mass organisations and its 'New Social Movements', a dialogue between them and the movements from the rest of Asia, a forum to evolve common analysis and strategy, and a high-energy cultural intercourse" (Bidwai 2003). The ASF then constituted a first attempt<sup>106</sup> to establish a debate between radical movements (traditional or new) that never before managed to build a successful dialogue<sup>107</sup>. As Muralidharan (2004) suggests, the main contribution given by the ASF process to the Indian political environment was allowing small and often marginalised groups of local activists to converge within a massive unifying front, to avoid the great fragmentation of the Indian public. An Indian feminist celebrated the great alliance building that took place on gender issues<sup>108</sup> where activists joined hands, Dalits, Muslim and Adivasi women (Jain, 2004), highlighting how alliance building was not taking place within fragmented sector, but also at a wider inter-sectoral level. ASF2003 also provided a major platform to interact with other Asian movements (Loh, 2004) and to build a coalition of movements that can balance the hegemonic role that Latin American and European networks<sup>109</sup> have within the WSF and in the broader global anti-neoliberalism movement<sup>110</sup>. Insofar substantiating the argument made in these dissertation about the positive recursive relation between national forums and regional and transnational alliances.

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<sup>106</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid: "It was very important that different kinds of organisations-not only different in issues that they are working but also the nature of the organisations NGOs, trade unions, organisations associated with parties, CBOs etc came together on one platform to show the unity in expressing the resistance to the inhuman globalisation process. It brought the feeling of solidarity and was therefore quite inspiring".

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Along with Bidwai, other voices praised the unity in diversity and the alleged disingenuous call of the Charter for an apparent multiplicity of views on the other world advocated. Although the WSF could not issue any common statement, it was too easy to navigate the unitary understanding within the forum and its hegemonic politics: the new alliance is being built (Muralidharan, 2004) against corporate globalisation, neoliberalism and US unilateralism. Unity in difference, political hegemony of the “new” party were called from many sides, but from as many sides distressed calls were voiced to stop the traditional machinations by professional politicians and big NGOs officers who were also engaging each other roughly: on one side, social movement activists deplored domination practices by old party people, on the other side, radical activists exposed inconsistent interests and allegiances of big NGOs linked to foreign funders. Against the hegemonic and monopolising tactics of the old left, precise denunciations have been made against the politics of the organisers connected to the CPI-M. Many have exposed how those actors fully dominated ASF2003<sup>111</sup> up to the point of hampering its chances to achieve its main goal: broadening alliances between political and social actors (Sen 2004; Jain 2004)<sup>112</sup>.

On the other side there were those who denounced the alleged NGOisation of the ASF<sup>113</sup>. According to these actors the role played by foreign funded NGOs, due to the financial resources at their disposal, was artificially high in the ASF. As in the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid: “the process of non inclusion of groups working at peripheral level and from marginalised sections such as fisherfolk community was very much visible. National level groups and some church bodies have been excluded. Exclusive process has indeed led parallel processes thus weakened the united struggle”.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

previous argument, this debate was based on real issues but it was artificially inflated in order to play a traditional political game. Those who really manned the forum were both CPI-M related actors and NGO officers in a sort of enlightening (of the potentialities of the WSF) strategic alliance. In a very important document circulated on the ASF mailing list, an important activist of the WSF (not belonging to the CPI-M) writes about this, clearly disclosing the terms of the new alliance between different sectors of the ICS: "The question of funding is another very politicized issue. True there is need for money to mount a WSF but to say that this necessarily brings us into the hands and control of the institutional NGOs (or even to say that some of us have not been straight / transparent about accepting money!), for me, lacks creative political thinking and manoeuvre" (February, 2003).

In recognising the importance of funding and its inherently political nature, this document invites the Indian organisers of the coming WSF2004 to engage in a meaningful debate with those who left the process or never joined it: "some left groups publicly dissociated themselves from the Forum. The alliances like the NAPM, the NCL [National Centre for Labour] – apart from many others such as the movement spearheaded by Vandana Shiva, bear shades of the Gandhian inspiration. (...) the alliances of left and Gandhi were not on a collision path or even demeaning or demonizing each other as was wont some time ago. Yet the reference to Gandhi had to be muted, as the Dalits would dissociate from the explicitly Gandhian presence. Ideological premises, controversial icons, did not

impede the “soul” of the space, the sense of oneness of the gatherings” (Jain, 2004:291).

As far as the NAPM is concerned, one of its main characters, Tom Kocherry released an interview to an Indian newspaper<sup>114</sup> in which he equally distance himself and his movement (National Fishworkers’ Forum) from both the domination of Corporate NGOs and leftist parties within the ASF. He explains in this way the decision of the NAPM not to take part in what was considered a very mild critique of globalisation by actors who had decided to ride the globalisation horse for their own political or economic benefit and who were not interested in radical change.

The tense relations between communist parties and their mass movements and the social movements gathered in NAPM date back at least 2 decades (Lindberg and Sverrisson, 1997; Mamdani, 1996, Oomen, 1997). The position of the parties was that social movements were dramatically fragmenting the resistance front against the class adversary and were depoliticising the social conflict removing from their actions any chances of effectiveness; they were not Marxist in inspiration, did not use class as the unit of social analysis, and challenged the role of the party as guide and vanguard for the revolution; they were focusing on women issues, caste, peasant, farmers and Adivasi (Chakma, 2004) and religious intolerance (Omvedt, 1993). Moreover they were holding back India's industrial development by opposing the necessary construction of fundamental engineering projects such

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<sup>114</sup> Sunday Express, 2003.

as the dams on the Narmada river. NAPM was accused of being populist in its politics, romantic in its claims and aspirations, and obscurantist in its considerations over natural resource management and development of India (Sinha, 2002; Rangan, 2000; De Angelis, 2004). The diffidence and incomprehension between NAPM and parties is profound and it works two ways. On the other side, NAPM activists found the politics of the communist parties, ineffective, corrupted, authoritarian and hegemonic and based on archaic strategies and agendas. They believe that parties no longer represent the marginalised sectors of the population.

There was little more than occasional strategic alliances in India between the two camps for many years (Kerala fishers allied with the CPI-M within state politics, as did the Chipko movement with the CPI, in the 70s and 80s<sup>115</sup>) but lately some bridges have been built by some of the organisations of the leftist parties and some social movements, and later also some unions joined NAPM struggles demanding jobs and rights for peasants and Adivasis of Maharashtra and Gujarat involved in dams projects on the Narmada river. This process of timid negotiation has been strongly facilitated by WSF India. As for some NGOs, the biggest ones sustained by foreign funding, the social movements often find them patronising and professionalised along cultural lines that do not share much with the culture of the people they claim to help. Moreover those NGOs activists are socially far too removed from the very people that they supposedly are advocating for.

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<sup>115</sup> Rangan, 2000.



If alliance building was the paramount objective of the ASF, this was made difficult by many attempts (conscious, unconscious or simply inevitable) by many actors to monopolise or hegemonise the ASF process. The effect of these attempts together with obvious organisational inexperience caused the active marginalisation of many groups and the lack of proactive inclusive actions to make of the ASF a really All-India process<sup>116</sup>. The lack of participation from entire regions like the Northeast<sup>117</sup> and many other areas was striking. Many commentators complained that in India so few knew about the ASF and that even in Hyderabad<sup>118</sup> not many were informed (Sen, 2004). Others exposed the fact that only few hundreds activists came from South Asia<sup>119</sup> and from the whole of Asia<sup>120</sup> and that the attempt to involve a good number of Pakistanis failed notwithstanding the strenuous efforts applied by the organisers (Durrani, 2003).

Another point of crucial relevance was the exclusion of some central themes from the general political debate within the organisational process. As many feminists reported<sup>121</sup>, the role of women within this new political process was marginal; a male dominated organisational framework was set up for ASF2003 and a mixture of lack of attention and blindness to delicate power dynamics provoked a reproduction of the gender divide that the ASF advocated against, a gender divide hidden behind rhetorical positions that extolled the role of women but ended marginalising them from those activities that were more empowering within the

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<sup>116</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. See also Sen, 2004.

<sup>121</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

organisational process and during the actual forum<sup>122</sup>. The same lack of attention regarded the youth<sup>123</sup>. And a group of activists from Karnataka exposed another of the open secrets of the ASF: whereas globalisation was discussed thoroughly, other issues perhaps closer to the reality of the Indian activists were “conveniently left out”. These topics were privatisation, secularism and the use of violence<sup>124</sup>.

A further crucial weakness of the ASF (which is also perhaps the main weakness of the WSF) was the lack of direct engagement with the most difficult issues related to building unity of intents with full respect of the diversity of beliefs and strategic considerations. The most difficult issue for ASF2003, along with male domination, was related to the engagement with Muslim activists. In his feedback to the ASF mailing list a Muslim activist denounces what is an almost incredible scenario: “What was also unfortunate at the ASF was to find some of our fellow participants asking some women in burqa to go back to Pakistan, engaging in eve-teasing”<sup>125</sup>. Confident that more time was needed and convinced that the WSF could represent the dramatic turn necessary in Indian politics, an almost unanimous consensus was reached to host WSF2004.

The fact that many organised alternative spaces where to voice their concerns, as a consequence of the impossibility to commensurate contrasting ideological positions, was considered a major set back for the ASF. Some advised that this happened because the ASF organisational space was on one side not open enough

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

and, on the other side, was lacking of expertise in managing the new concept of the open space. The dramatic improvement of the negotiation practices and the outcome of WSF2004 in terms of alliance building and learning and communication process, supports this analysis. In front of an expectation of innovative politics that revolutionised the Indian way of doing politics, the actual outcome of a process just one year old left much to be desired. But also a call for more realism was done by the organisers to realise the complexities in which ASF2003 took shape and the long term changes that have been put in place by this process.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed four crucial themes that set the scene of the reflections at the centre of this thesis and are fully articulated in the next chapters. In the first section I tracked back the history of the WSF and how this is directly linked to decades of social and political struggle. In particular the direct initiators of the WSF learnt about coalition making and articulation of differences in their struggle against the Brazilian dictatorship: their desire to share their knowledge and the need to build a global alliance against neoliberalism are at the roots of the WSF movement.

In the second section I discussed the evolution of the WSF from its Latin American origins to its Indian avatar as a consequence of a process of globalisation of the WSF process and as strategic choice to fulfil the political

project to build a counter-hegemonic alliance of CSO&Ms which involved other regions of the South starting with the very influential South Asian sub-continent. Later I discussed the ways through which the WSF process has been welcomed in India as a tool to create a national alliance to oppose neoliberalism, casteism and communalism. The organisers and participants of ASF2003 saw the opportunity to build a national strategic alliance that could solve the decades long fragmentation of the progressive ICS and bring back politics into the Indian scenario strongly affected by the de-politicising strategies of the neoliberal governments.

The last section of this chapter engaged the many complexities that the organisers of ASF2003 encountered in bringing together activists from different backgrounds and the shortcomings of this process. I showed how the process was at times plagued by authoritarian politics (often referred to as “old politics”) overtly in opposition with the stated principles of the WSF. Even more importantly, the newness of the WSF framework in India and the engrained Indian social structures and political practices provoked the systematic marginalisation of women, Muslims and Adivasis without that the shy attempts to intervene to obviate these crucial shortcomings managed to achieve any significant result.

The complex tensions between competing forces, lack of organisational experience, traditional lack of trust<sup>126</sup>, exclusion of certain forces<sup>127</sup>, and ambiguous status of the ASF where old actors are leading the path towards a

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<sup>126</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

radically new culture of politics<sup>128</sup>, generated the ambiguous success of the ASF. However, ASF2003 was an inspiring learning process (Bidwai, 2003): exposing its weakness is part of that important journey of finding new solutions. The difficulties encountered in organising it are part of the process in which movements must be ready to embark when constituting themselves within a radically democratic framework. This learning process is centred not only on political strategy but also on cultural exchanges between activists and on a brave acceptance that really meaningful interaction is a difficult process that is closely intertwined with power dynamics between groups and within groups. All the mentioned limitations notwithstanding, organisers and participants to ASF2003 clearly perceived the opportunities that the WSF format was providing ICS with: the chance to return legitimacy, dignity and power to politics (Kabir, 2003). This was then the political and strategic setup in the Indian context when the process for WSF2004 was about to start. Before directly engaging with WSF2004, in the next two chapters I discuss in detail, identity, nature, vision, mission and strategic tools of the WSF.

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<sup>128</sup> The WSF new culture of politics is one based on the valuing of diversity, the interlinking of multiple solidarities and the development of a profound sense of co-responsibility (Fisher in Larsen, 2003; Osterweil, 2004; Sen, 2004; Glasius and Timms, 2006; Newell, 2005; Menon, 2005).

### **Chapter 3: WSF identity, goals, strategies.**

In the previous chapter I discussed the origins and background of the WSF and its path from Latin America to Asia, highlighting its successes, amid contradictions and important complexities, in such different contexts. But what is the WSF? What is its goal? What are the strategies devised to pursue that goal? This chapter is divided into three sections each addressing the three questions advanced here. Section 1 discusses the identity of the WSF with particular attention to WSF2004. It has been suggested (Juris, 2004; Whitaker, 2005; Nunes, 2005) that the nature of the WSF is best described with reference to Castells ground breaking work on networks (1996, 1997 and 2001 among others). In that sense the WSF would be a global horizontal network of GCS organisations and movements. I suggest that this description of the WSF does not fully capture its complexity: I describe the WSF as a hybrid organisational form made of different articulated structures linked among them often in both a networked manner but also in hierarchical ways. This organisational form articulates bodies such as the IC and the local OCs with the transnational networks and organisations that constitute the base of the WSF.

The second section of this chapter discusses the vision of the WSF as expressed in its Charter of Principles. Although its participants often stress the lack of a shared common vision for a better world, I show here how those principles on which the WSF is built, and whose acceptance constitute the conditions of membership,

delineate a vision that I define as an emancipatory cosmopolitan utopia. The third section of this chapter discusses the strategy elaborated by the WSF to achieve its goals: I define that strategy as an epistemological struggle, one which challenges the very assumptions on which neoliberalism predicates its understanding of society and humanity, leaving instead the direct political engagement to the actions of the organisations and movements that constitute the WSF base.

### **1. The identity of the WSF**

The organisational form of the WSF has generated an incredible wealth of debates. Some organisers and commentators consider the novelty of the WSF closely related to its new organisational configuration as a horizontal network (Juris, 2004; Pleyers, 2004; Whitaker, 2005; Correa Leite, 2003; Nunes, 2005) through which GCS can engage in the formation of a global public sphere (Hardt, 2002), others see the WSF as a global movement, a political actor or a global party, even a “post-modern Prince” in embryo (Gill, 2000). The objective of this section is to discuss the nature of the WSF. I maintain that the WSF is the most substantial initiative of the counter-hegemonic and emancipatory global civil society. It is structured as a complex articulation of, on one side, local, national, regional and global networks of organisations and social movements and, on the other, more or less ad-hoc organisational and political structures that may constitute the embryonic form of a fully institutional global political actor (Gill, 2000). In the following pages I review the debate, both internal and external to the WSF, on what it is or should be, I will highlight strengths and weaknesses of

alternative and contrasting views and I will provide evidences to my main argument. In succession I discuss the debates around some of the cleavages in the understanding of the WSF (both within it and by commentators): I first address the movement/space cleavage, then the network/organisation and finally, briefly, the actor/public sphere.

According to the first chapter of its Charter, the WSF is an “open meeting place” where “groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital” can articulate strategic alliances. Strategically united against their common enemy, neoliberalism, the WSF2004 saw a massive participation from civil society organisations from India, Asia, and the whole world: trade unions, environmental organisations, women's groups, human rights activists, peace activists, Dalits, Adivasi, democracy fighters and alternative sexuality movements (Chenoy, 2004b). Inclusive, pluralist, extolling the creative role of differences, the WSF proposed itself in the Indian political scenario as something radically “new”. If all its crucial attributions soon became familiar to those involved in the process, what these attributions were defining was much more elusive. According to the Charter:

The WSF is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society (Chapter 1).

The WSF is therefore an arena, a place, where participants meet to debate and exchange proposals and plans aimed at effective actions, which they will design



and put into being without central direction. Later in the Charter the WSF is defined also as a “world process” (Chapter 3). The annual events are just one moment of that process that gather social movements and civil society actors (Chapter 5) that recognise themselves in the Charter. But the WSF is not only a meeting place, it is a “context that, in a decentralized fashion, interrelates organizations and movements engaged in concrete action at levels from the local to the international” (Chapter 10). It seems in this formulation, then, that the WSF would have the proactive ability to act, “in a decentralised fashion” to interrelate organisations. This seems to contradict its definition as a space and creates some of the confusion and vagueness that characterise the definition of the nature of the WSF by its organisers. But it is also the case, I argue here, that the WSF has attracted a vast array of groups that found easy to negotiate terms and conditions of their memberships, thanks to the vagueness of its contours, the inclusiveness of its nature and its decentralised structure; partly network, partly administrative organisation and political collective, partly “open space”.

The “open space” discourse, in particular, has proven to be strategically very successful in providing the WSF with the necessary initial inclusiveness to become the referent of a wide section of the progressive GCS. However, the validity of the “open space” model is often challenged in the WSF. The most important debates taking place within the WSF and in the limited analytical literature so far produced on the subject, are centred on contradictions between the claims by the organisers (WSF as “open space”) and their daily practices (aiming at creating a structured and centralised global political movement). The following

passage illustrates the contradictions I referred to above. Biccum commenting on a passage by Teivainen (a member of the IC and a university lecturer who has extensively written on the WSF), accurately exposes the ambiguity in the discourse on the WSF: “While there are reasons to maintain coherence and some underlying rules in the process [*a desire to fix meaning*] so that the WSF brand [*an interesting appropriation of corporate marketing language*] does not simply evaporate [*anxiety over the impossibility of fixing meaning*], too much control by the IC and the secretariat is bound to limit the creativity of those in *charge* of the *decentralised* events [*contradiction and coeval statement of belief*] (emphasis and asides mine)” (2005:127).

The tension that this passage illustrates is defined by Santos as one of the crucial “cleavages” that risk fragmenting the WSF (Santos, 2005). This cleavage divides the WSF environment along what many call the new/old dividing line. Traditional political organisations (such as left parties offshoots, trade unions, and large peasants' organisations) prefer to work towards a WSF as a political actor (Cassen, 2004); other organisations (such as NGOs, single issues social movements and small libertarian collectives) are more at ease in a WSF as space where to meet and coordinate freely their actions with like-minded actors rather than have to work along political lines discussed by political organisms in less than participatory ways (as in the tradition of left parties). Further ambiguity in this debate is provided by the media.

The media reporting on the WSF often conflated it with the Assembly of Social

Movements (ASM). The ASM takes place within the framework of the WSF events, gathers a host of traditional organisations (most of them of Trotskyist inspiration), led by a political committee that produces a unitary final declaration. This gave often the impression that the WSF had abandoned the “space” identity to become a social movement (Osava, 2001 and 2005; Adamovsky, 2004). Others instead remark how the WSF is a space where networks are built by movements and not under a centralised coordination (Adamovsky, 2004; Pleyers, 2004). If the centralisation happened, the WSF would abdicate its ambitious vision to a vanguardist group of political organisers. But not all in the WSF feel so keen to subscribe to the space choice as a permanent identity (Cassen, 2004; Tormey, 2004). The creation of a deep gap between the “open space” movement and the authoritarian traditional left creates a serious danger for the WSF. Adamovsky is not the only one to register this tension (Ferrer, 2004). In all the events so far organised (in Brazil, Italy, France, United Kingdom, India), all the decision-making power rests with party bureaucrats (Ferrer, 2004) who provide strategic prominence to a limited number of activists and intellectuals and to their ideas and organisations (Sen, 2004c; Klein, 2003; De Angelis, 2005; Dowling, 2005; L. L. Sullivan, 2005). Extremely vocal against the attempts to “institutionalise” the WSF, as some suggest, arguing that the forum needs more focus and direction to be really effective against an organised enemy such as neoliberalism, Whitaker vigorously argued that only the “open space” would ensure the openness and inclusiveness of the WSF and plurality against totalitarian control. And to those who argue that structured movements can be horizontal, accountable, democratic and pluralistic he opposes that movements are identified by a *congregation* of

people, the *definition* of their strategies, the *formulation* of programmes for action, and by the *distribution* of tasks and responsibilities; it is therefore inevitable (as history has proven), that movements have pyramidal organisational structures (Whitaker, 2004:112) in order to fulfil those conditions.

Given its fundamental importance as strategic tool and as identity label attributed to the WSF both by its initiators and a vast majority of its local organisers and participants, I dedicate the next chapter to the discussion of the “open space” discourse and its limitations. Here I concentrate on the analytical strengths and weaknesses of the network structure as description of the nature of the WSF. I show that although networks make a relevant portion of the WSF, it is inappropriate to consider the WSF itself only as a network.

Different technological infrastructures and organisational models have been articulated in extremely complex and sophisticated ways within WSF2004. *Networks* of activists shared communicative journeys to spread the news of WSF2004, *coalitions* of actors constituted the core group of organisers who mobilised the necessary resources, ad-hoc organisational *structures* were put together in Mumbai to coordinate and direct the efforts to hold the event, ad-hoc *leadership* took care in different moments of different organisational aspects. If the technological aspects related to ICT are the feature of contemporary world (Castells), the shift toward a fully networked societal model is not yet accomplished. Networks operate at different scales from the local to the global,

and have no centralized hierarchical structure<sup>129</sup>, no unique vision, and are exceptionally pluralistic<sup>130</sup>. The WSF responds to these qualities but also to some others that legitimate its definition as a highly complex and hybrid organisational configuration. In the following paragraphs I discuss the nature of the broad global constellation of networks that orbits around what the Charter calls the WSF “world process”. I discuss the specific political and administrative organisational structures of WSF2004 later in this work (chapter 6).

The foundation of the WSF are informal networks of activists (Whitaker et al., 2005); the complex institutional framework of the WSF is built on top of those informal webs ambiguously balancing between autonomy, horizontality, opacity and hierarchy. Horizontal in aspiration and based on the articulation of autonomous entities, the paradox of informal organisational structures such as the WSF has been exposed by Freeman (1970) among others. The level of hierarchisation of autonomous networks is for these authors determined by the density of informal structures. In the case of the WSF that density is very high and the consequence is a murky and hierarchical organisational structure in search of a democratic identity. Escobar (2000), instead, invites us to think in a way that drastically separates networks, with their variable degree of hierarchical organisation (with centralised control, hierarchical ranking, consistent planning, determined goals and tactics and norms of behaviour) from meshworks, based on the principles of self-organisation (Escobar, 2000; Maturana and Varela, 1992)

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<sup>129</sup> Networks are defined by their flexibility, adaptability and horizontality (Castells, 2001).

<sup>130</sup> "Networks" are the organizing principle of the information society (Castells, 1996). Networks have been widely used to describe and analyse transnational social movements (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco, 1997, Keck and Sikkink, 1998). For an accurate analysis of the WSF as network see Juris (2004 and 2005).

among heterogeneous entities and full autonomies of their components (Escobar, 2000; Waterman, 2004b), and suggests that the WSF could approximate such organisational design (Escobar, 2000).

The contrasting positions in the WSF on organisational issues are, on one side, those that advocate a more loose organisational form and, on the other, those that advocate the rationalisation of its organisational structure. The arguments of this second group are centred on the observation that a structure is emerging anyway in an informal and highly hierarchical way giving rise, as it was in the case of WSF2004, to a rather uncoordinated and potentially authoritarian structure. An important debate on the WSF organisational issues developed around the work of those who suggest to look at the social movements of the information age (Castells, 1997) as networks of real and virtual components facilitated by information and communication technology, first of all the Internet with which these movements share the same strategic strength and unified communicative protocol (Castells, 1997 and 2001). If some kind of communicative protocol is being built within GCS, however, severe limitations in its inclusiveness still exist, and the WSF is not immune.

In WSF2004, English was the shared linguistic protocol, but this has created exclusion of those activists who express themselves in vernacular languages exposing a crucial divide referred to as the India/Bharat divide: to India belong the educated middle class whereas to Bharat (Hindi name of India) the mass of workers and peasants. The cultural protocols are as different and contrasting as

linguistic codes. In India, the language of protest and the cosmologies of the oppressed represented an incredible variety of perspectives that not always transferred into dialogue effectively. The political ideology sustaining the WSF was also not so uniquely shared by all participants creating often paradoxical communications. The lack of shared protocols therefore warns the analyst about the crucial differences between the Internet and social movements' networks. But it is not only the lack of a shared protocol that is relevant here, the difference of the constitutive cultural protocols on which the Internet is built and the new cultural politics of the WSF is striking.

Castells describes the culture that makes the new information society thrive in the following terms: "at its core, the new economy is based on culture: on the culture of innovation, on the culture of risk, on the culture of expectations, and ultimately, on the culture of hope in the future" (2001:112). This definition does not apply to the WSF: if the central role of culture is perfectly understood by the WSF, innovation, risk and hope in the future as the foundations of world society are considered the values which sustain the belief in the trickle-down of technological knowledge and wealth which instead have proven to widen the gap between rich and poor. Moreover, the Internet has grown exponentially thanks to a cultural setting based on technocratic and meritocratic belief on progress through technology shared by an exceptional community of hackers expressing completely "free and open technological creativity" and "embedded in virtual networks aimed at reinventing society, and materialized by money-driven entrepreneurs into workings of the new economy" (Castells, 2001:59). The WSF has yet to find its

own hackers with universal respect and support both from the users of their creations and from those who will have to implement their models of social change. But the main ideological position in the WSF opposes technocratic, depoliticised societal change. If hackers tend to approach change as problem solving, in the WSF the approach is focusing on political counter-hegemonic forces to neoliberalism whose legitimacy cannot be proved on the basis of a set of mathematical equations.

An important similarity between the WSF and Internet refers to their material infrastructure. The Internet is not only the communication that traverse it, but the gigantic backbones that transfer it. The access to the Internet is limited by the link to that infrastructure, managed by governments and multinationals bigger in size than many governments, and unequally distributed on the planet. Inequality of infrastructural means, (access to computers and link to electric grids), created fundamental divides between indigenous people of India and officers of big NGOs based in Washington, movements leaders and village activists (Mertes, 2002), legitimate concerns in the Indian context where mass organisations and NGOs dominated the process and smaller groups had a marginal influence (Hand and Sandywell, 2002)<sup>131</sup>. Material inequalities are determinant to enter the communicative negotiation taking place in the WSF and come here before knowledge, cultural and ideological imbalances: this aspect is marginally dealt with in the WSF, exposing an extraordinary strategic weakness.

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<sup>131</sup> The social network as a whole (society) is characterized by a simultaneous articulation of elites on one side and disorganised masses on the other ("elites are cosmopolitan, people are local" Castells, 1996:415).



Two challenges for inclusion are shared by the Internet and the WSF: education and material infrastructure. As far as the latter is concerned, wealth and access imbalances have to be dealt with urgency to allow democratic participation in the deliberative forum of the WSF, but this issue is beyond its immediate mission. As far as the former is concerned Internet is not inherently a tool of freedom and it is often used to impose power on the uninformed for political, commercial or ideological reasons. The WSF is a site inhabited by the same contradictions. To avoid that ideological brainwashing is performed by unscrupulous leaders on the uninformed and to allow access to the communicative protocols, education is necessary. Any differential educative capital inevitably amounts to exclusion. The WSF, although constituting an extraordinary pedagogic instrument, has not yet fully explored its potentialities, de facto limiting its ability to bridge fundamental educative gaps within its space.

The lack of shared communicative protocols and the structural imbalances of cultural and social capital make the WSF a very particular hybrid network in which networks sharing communicative protocols are articulated with others through translation hubs and where, supposedly, higher concentration of human and social capital are matched by Freirian responsibility (Whitaker, 2005) towards the least endowed (according to which “capitalists” engage in processes of de-learning of their dominating knowledge and of de-engagement from their political power, while using their capitals to benefit their communities). However, translation hubs within the WSF do have high strategic power due to their ability to transmit messages between sub-networks: so much as to, at times, assume roles

of gatekeepers. An illustration of the above statement is represented by the case of those organisations or networks of organisations “represented” in the decision-making committees by one member according to democratic practices challenged by the participatory approach of the WSF. In India the NAPM (see Chapter 2) was represented in the IOC by one member who became the translation hub between the WSF and potentially millions of members affiliated to the NAPM who learnt about the WSF and interacted with it through the hub. This applied to all other organisations as well.

The inevitable limitations of this translation process are at the centre of the most inspiring experiments conducted by the WSF. Those experiments here referred to are at the centre of the WSF epistemological struggle as discussed later in this chapter. The shortcomings in which those experiments incur in the WSF process considerably compromise the process through which its members are contributing to the negotiation of the foundations of a globally shared cultural and political protocol. In other words, those shortcomings and contradictions might considerably compromise the process of construction of the global public sphere to which, for some, the WSF is crucially instrumental (Hardt, 2002; Smith, 2004<sup>132</sup>).

According to Hardt, movements like the WSF “function something like a public sphere, in the sense that they can allow full expression of differences within the common context of open exchange”. However, notwithstanding its extensive

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<sup>132</sup> See A. Sen 2000.

fortune, the concept of public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 1991 and 1992; Calhoun, 1992) gives the impression that within it citizens can check and balance power by accessing communicational resources and through participation in the democratic arena (see McGuigan (1998) on Garnam's work (1995); Wright, 2005). Others, (see McGuinan's work) warn not to lose sight of the analytical strengths of the concept of hegemony, which explains the prevalence of the strong over the weak, through manipulation and consensus building rather than by use of sheer force, in the decision-making processes over missions and strategies. "Hegemonic strategies" explain more than "argumentative rationality" the dynamics that take place in civil society (and that constitute it in the first place) and by extension describe more accurately the nature of the strategic practices taking place within the WSF and aiming at creating a counter-hegemonic consensus to neoliberalism.

However, the inevitable power imbalance between allies in the WSF space and the consequences of those imbalances and their implication for the articulation of the political dialogue in the "open space" is often denied by the WSF organisers. The dynamics of power within the WSF are dismissed by means of the concept of *articulacao* (articulation), which expresses the possibility for strategical links among movements that are contingent and based on freedom and equal power. However, as Laclau and Mouffe demonstrated (1985), articulation is a precondition of hegemonic practices, rather than an emancipatory tool for less powerful political and social actors within national or transnational networks like the WSF<sup>133</sup>. In the WSF public sphere the "open space" is an hegemonic tool used

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<sup>133</sup> See Perera (2002) for an early application of Laclau and Mouffe's theory to the WSF.

(Sen, 2005) to “civilise the uncivil” (see further chapter 4), to bring them in a context of shared values and principles that inform global citizenship (Khan, 2004; Daulatzai, 2004): a task that fulfils the definition of hegemony (Gramsci), and closely recalls the disciplining of the subject (Foucault) more than it fulfils the tasks of argumentative rationality applied in the public sphere (Habermas).

The arguments that conflate the WSF with a global public sphere present the same limitations of some of the discourses on civil society (see chapter 1). Their analytical strength is lost in their normative tension. Issues of access, capital imbalances and education limit the role that activists can play within the WSF and their participation in shaping linguistic protocols, rationalities, cultures and ideologies. However, the potentialities to initiate processes through which unifying languages, cultural codes, and political ideologies are built towards a critical cosmopolitanism are consistently shown by the WSF. Those processes can be dialogic only when the bases for that dialogue are set by conflict and struggle. Like neo-liberalism, the counter-hegemonic utopia is fragmented, fluid, ever changing and malleable and the WSF seems to be able to facilitate the articulation of those different and conflicting views in building a counter-hegemonic movement to neoliberalism (Tormey, 2005). Like neoliberalism, the counter-hegemonic bloc is putting in place an institutional support structure of which the WSF is one of the components (together with strategic networks, compacts, and coalitions of activists – such as Via Campesina, ATTAC, the World March of Women – and funders like the Funders Network on Trade and Globalisation, Novib and others, strategically involved in funding the WSF). Like the neoliberal

*dispositif* (Foucault, 1990), the counter-hegemonic one is internally contested and traversed by cleavages, fractures and power struggles with at their core, on one side, the incongruence between values stated in the Charter and their instantiation in the organisational practice of the WSF (Sen, 2005) and on the other the participation to the decision-making dynamics. Moreover, both hegemonies are not diametrically opposed but they constitute each other and inhabit continuously shifting grounds.

Before moving to analysing the strategies through which the WSF is organising its hybrid structure, let me recap the nature of that structure. It is made of a base, which I described as a network of networks articulated around translation hubs, a political and an administrative structure. Those structures are global (or aspiring to be so), like the IC and the International Secretariat (IS) or more local like the Brazilian OC, the Indian OC etc. The networked nature of the relations between the thousands of organisations and social movements from around the world show all the strengths but also all the limitations of the network form: I here stressed the differences in access to those networks and of those networks to the decision-making structures of the WSF highlighting how these imbalances create important power differentials in the movement against neoliberalism. The way in which those power imbalances have been managed so far, more or less openly, resembles closely hegemonic strategies of alliance building. These strategies I discuss in the next section.

## **2. Hegemony in the WSF**

I argue in this thesis that the WSF mission is the construction of a consensus between the progressive organisations and movements of the GCS. This consensus is sometimes referred to as the PoA consensus (Byrd, 2005). This consensus will create strategic alliances at all levels from local to global through sections and subsections of the WSF process. This consensus though will not be designed, agreed and imposed by a small leadership (as in more traditional political structures), but it will be negotiated democratically and in a participatory fashion by all members of the WSF meeting in its “open space”. According to Byrd the PoA consensus should facilitate links between GCS actors, favour communicative action and help integrate at the horizontal level the different struggles for social justice. In the following paragraphs I explore potentialities and limitations of the WSF to facilitate the construction of such a consensus and of the strategic tools with which it has endowed itself.

The consolidation of the anti-neoliberalism movement (Chesters, 2003; Chesters and Welsh, 2005) taking place through instruments like the WSF is constructed on conflicting strategies: on one side some (Teivainen, 2004; Seoane and Taddei, 2002) claim that a vanguard (such as the ASM leaders) is necessary to lead the process (Callinicos, 2004), on the opposite end of the range are those who claim that self-organisation will allow the WSF to fully express its progressive energy (Hardt, 2002); somewhere in between there are a range of positions arguing (and

acting) in favour of some form of negotiated hegemonic process based on recognised strategic priorities. Whereas few advocate vanguardism and a hegemony that could be fully controlled (Lenin), others are aware of the complexities of all hegemonic processes and their inherent nature of contested and uncontrollable processes (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Roseberry, 1994). The creative conflicts embedded in these opposing views are often expressed in decision-making formulas and strategies and in organisational structures, as I will detail later, which give more or less importance to the end result rather than to the process or vice versa. However, the main innovative feature of the WSF is precisely a strong care in the process rather than the goal. This struggle between the old and new understanding of how the new counter-hegemonic political actor will be formed is perhaps the most lacerating tension within the WSF. The actions of the ASM have created resentment and concerns from many of the initiators of the forum<sup>134</sup> and those who strongly believe in surpassing the old political logic<sup>135</sup>, exposing the political struggle between “old” political formations and new actors<sup>136</sup>.

If the hegemonic attempts to shape the forum according to less experimental organisational forms and political objectives is in fact taking place, the reaction to those attempts are not less vigorous: if Cassen (in Smith, 2004) considers

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<sup>134</sup> Whitaker (2004) denounces the pressure to have the ASM on the last day of the forum aimed at giving the impression that that is the conclusive moment of the forum and its deliberations are those of the whole forum.

<sup>135</sup> Adamovsky (2005) explains that the ASM is a clear initiative of old left called with a new appealing name.

<sup>136</sup> According to Roberto Savio, IC member and honorary president of IPS, “the Forum must become political or risk being of use to participants only” (in Simonson, 2004:40), whereas for Medha Patkar “the WSF should remain ‘an expression of people power and non-electoral politics’”(Ib.:41).

necessary creating a common political agenda with which engage in the political field, authors like Das (2005) on the other hand denounce those attempts as dangerous forms of control which would inevitably suppress the WSF creative energy. The confrontation within the WSF could be summarised as one between those who think of it as a Leninist (vanguardist) movement, those who think, in a Gramscian way, of it as a modern prince (Patomaki and Teivainen, 2004, Teivainen, 2004) and those who believe with Gill (2000) that it could become a post-modern prince (a post-party organisation) (Waterman 2003b).

If vanguardist positions are marginal in the WSF, strong hegemonic practices are at the forefront. If on one side some believe in the creative possibilities of critical dialogue in shaping a negotiated cultural horizon which exposes the contradictions of the current world system and by this producing lasting change (Marcus and Fisher, 1986), others consider indispensable the role of a strong leadership (see chapter 4). This debate had moments of particular tension and culminated in WSF2005 with an act that created a lot of controversy by a group of intellectuals and activists who publicised a political Manifesto in 10 points to be signed and put into practice by the rank-and-file of the WSF<sup>137</sup>: the initiative was criticised and often ridiculed by many but this experience did not impede that the following year, in Bamako, a new controversial document was drafted along the same lines and with the same exclusive methodology<sup>138</sup>.

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<sup>137</sup> The group included Bernard Cassen, two Nobel Prize winners (Aminata Traore and Saramago), and anti-globalisation scholars such as Samir Amin, and Walden Bello (Anthony and Silva, 2005; Glasius and Timms, 2006; Muller, 2005).

<sup>138</sup> On the Bamako Appeal see Sen et al., 2007.



The stress on the role of the WSF as catalyst of a global counter-hegemony has a legion of supporters (Sader, 2003; Toussaint interviewed by Ferrari, 2003; Seoane and Taddei, 2002). According to some (Glasius and Timms, 2006) the two positions (deliberative versus hegemonic practices) are necessarily at odds; I, however, have observed in India that these positions are negotiated with energy and the result was suggestive of an outcome that surpasses not only the opposition but the positions themselves towards new models of political ideology and organisation beyond deliberation *or* struggle.

It is possible to observe this process in the attempts to share debating spaces and action agendas by actors with no previous experience of collaborative strategising in India (such as single issues movement and traditional leftist organisations). The most visible outcomes of these processes seem to point towards the categories analysed above. However, it is possible to observe new outcomes at a still very early stage which suggest that there are important creative dynamics taking place as a result of the catalysing process initiated by the WSF in India: the anti-war movement that convened in India after the WSF has seen the participation of members of NGOs and political parties, trade unions and single issue movement and constitutes a clear example of the possibility to act together. To do so a necessary ideological and tactical flexibility has been shown by all sides. It is possible that such flexibility inspires more profound processes of political elaboration: what the outcomes of these processes might be is hard to say, however it is possible to advance some, although cautious, conjectures in the sense of the aspirations of critical cosmopolitanism advocated by Mignolo which I

discuss later in this chapter. Those negotiated values would constitute the shared communicative conditions for a process of global deliberation. Those conditions would be established through struggle in the first place and will be inevitably contested (formulated and reformulated through hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Roseberry, 1994).

The new counter-hegemonic practices explored by movements within the WSF are (Santos, 2004 and 2005) able to design negotiated visions to guide the daily practices of sociability of the citizens of the world. These negotiated counter-hegemonic practices built within the WSF are necessary in order to move beyond the discourse of older movements towards a critically more powerful, post-colonial, non-capitalist, trans-modern emancipatory discourse. The nature of the relationships and visions built within the WSF is shaped by a pedagogical process that experiments and designs collaboratively visions and lifestyles articulated beyond the limitations of the neoliberal dimension<sup>139</sup>.

The WSF represents “one possible strategy for pedagogical interventions attempting to deal with complexity and uncertainty in a responsible way. This strategy tries to avoid normalising subjectivities and does not propose consensual outcomes for dialogue, which can be seen as an innovative aspect for pedagogical processes, but which by no means offers a universal or 'ultimate' solution for all educational challenges” (Andreotti, 2005). The WSF pedagogical potentialities are fully expressed through the uniqueness of its political project and its fluid and

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<sup>139</sup> For Santos the WSF is a “popular university” for social movements, activists and leaders (Santos, 2005; Smith, 2004).

adaptive shape based on the daily multi-logic construction of a vision for another world (Patomaki and Teivainen, 2004). The radical pedagogy that informs the WSF according to its initiators (Whitaker, 2005), critics (Santos, 2005) and many of its supporters is the corner stone on which is built its most coordinated, innovative and potentially successful counter-hegemonic strategy against neoliberalism: the epistemological struggle. I discuss the nature of this powerful strategic tool in the next section.

### **3. Epistemological Struggle**

Attempts at categorising movements' strategies seem not to apply to the WSF due to its character of convergence point of expressions of the analogical continuum of the progressive GCS that goes from the small anarchist collective to the big international NGO or trade union (Klaviter, 2000). The common, unifying strategy for the whole movement, says Agnoletto (2002), is non-violence. It is around this instrument that the different elements of the WSF converge to oppose the logic of war and violence embodied by neoliberalism. Outcome of the cross-fertilisation of Catholic research around the doctrine of pope John XXIII and the theology of liberation, Gandhian non-violence and Buddhist doctrine so central in the peace movement of the 70<sup>th</sup> against the war in Vietnam and American militarism, non-violence represents the highest elaboration of social change through individual internal and profound change coalesced into political action. Moreover, it powerfully challenges the very ethical and moral foundations of

those political systems based on the (inevitability of the) oppression of the weak by the strong (the survival of the fittest). This approach is reflected in the conviction on which the WSF was built in the first place that radical change is a longer process than a political revolution and it needs a more forward looking strategic approach (Whitaker, 2005). The strategy to achieve the change advocated is spiritual for many of the initiators of the forum, cultural for their closer secular allies. For the latter the relative strategy, and the most analysed, is “epistemological struggle”: a profound change in the way in which the world and humanity are conceived to oppose the neoliberal totalitarian epistemology.

Alternated practices of struggle and withdrawal into deliberation are producing the WSF new political culture and are product of it (Fisher in Larsen, 2003; Osterweil, 2004; Sen, 2004; Glasius and Timms, 2006; Newell, 2006; Menon, 2005). The main characteristic of this cultural political approach to social change is the apparent slowness of the process. The main principle on which this strategy is rooted is one that does not seek to address the symptoms but rather the roots of the ills: in this case not the institutions of neoliberalism, but the epistemological assumptions on which neoliberalism is built. In order to fully develop a new set of tools that allows the WSF to pursue its cultural politics, it understands its daily political practice as a pedagogic process of recursive and shared learning in which all actors of the forum value their specific knowledges and put them to service of the whole community of activists. This unique feature constitutes the precondition for the epistemological struggle of the WSF. Before discussing in more detail the features of the epistemological struggle, I will mention briefly that this

understanding of the strategic approach to the struggle against neoliberalism is contested within the WSF by those actors (see above) who advocate for a direct confrontation with the neoliberal institutions. Those critics often accuse the WSF to be a “talking shop” and express doubts on the real alternative offered by the WSF to the WEF and even to capitalism both on ideological, organisational, and political accounts (Milstein, 2002). Responses to those criticisms stress that a revolution in understanding politics and social change is being produced within the WSF. In this sense “The other world we are trying to build has to be built first in each of us and in our organisations. We are what we do not what we think, so our world will be the outcome of what we do not what we say” (Grajev in Whitaker, 2003). Others critique the fact that by simply opposing the WEF, the WSF “suffers from an affliction of opposition” and, as reported by Corbyn in the case of the anti-war movement, by a “vagueness of identity” for not being defined by an ideology but by an opposition (Simonson, 2004:42). In this sense, precisely self-education (Whitaker, 2003) within the boundaries of the WSF seems to be the best strategy to define the movement as a positive outcome of the interactions of their true ideals and aspirations rather than only in simple opposition to the political adversary.

For Whitaker, the success of the WSF so far, and its potentialities for the future, rest in its ability to win against neoliberalism by moving beyond the political paradigm that informed political action in the last century (Whitaker et al., 2005; Sen, 2004b). In its stead, within the forum a political culture is being experimented which is grounded in openness, multiplicity, democratic

participation and horizontality (Osterweil, 2004). Santos (2005), describes the radical epistemology of the WSF as "a critical utopia, an epistemology of the South and an emergent cosmopolitan politics" (2005:13).

The epistemology of the South is based on two main operations that he calls "sociology of absences" and "sociology of presences". The sociology of absences analyses those processes according to which what is believed to be non-existent (like "alternatives" in the expression "there is no alternative") is instead the production of a deliberate process of production of that non-existence. This is the strategy of the imperialist epistemology at the basis of neoliberalism. That totalitarian epistemology uses five main tools. He calls them: monoculture of knowledge, monoculture of the linear time, monoculture of the naturalization of differences, the monoculture of the universal and global, and the monoculture of the production criteria and capitalist efficacy. The outcome of the production of non-existences is the waste of incredibly valuable social experience (that whose existence is instead denied and removed from the possible as "anachronistic", "irrational", "unthinkable"). To all monocultures he proposes to substitute the concept of ecology of knowledge, according to which no knowledge is absolute but all are in relation to each other like beings in an ecosystem. The task of the sociology of presences is to identify and value differences, to understand what the main social trends are, or the social potentialities not fully exposed or simply ignored from the hegemonic rationality, and make their development possible. This is a process of investigation of those potentialities inscribed in society and denied by the hegemonic culture.

The ecology of knowledge Santos proposes can therefore better than any other approach describe the context in which the negation of the hegemonic neoliberal epistemology by the WSF (Torney, 2005) becomes transformed into the construction of a cosmopolitan environment where social change is a conscious and continuous learning process. This process is based on a communication which creates a shared language (Acselrad, 2003) through recursive translations (Santos, 2003 and 2005) of cognitive systems and actions. The two fundamental moments of the social change catalysed by the social forum are therefore a continuous learning process which highlights the importance of all knowledges produced by human beings (Andreotti, 2005 and Andreotti and Dowling, 2004) and translation (Sinha, 2002; Ribeiro, 2004; Santos, 2005b; Venuti, 1998) as the process by which those knowledges produce further knowledge as a process of continuous multiple and recursive dialectical synthesis: this process can contribute to the creation of a transnational literacy (Spivak, in Biccum, 2005) on which the critical cosmopolitan world could be built. This process describes what Santos (2005) calls the progressive utopia of the WSF<sup>140</sup>.

This process of building a universally shared cosmopolitan language through the recursive processes of translation of emotional (Goodwin, Jaspers and Polletta, 2001) symbolic (Melucci, 1988), and action codes is the instantiation of the counter-hegemonic process of consolidation of the progressive GCS that the WSF is facilitating by giving a consistent direction to the movement through which a

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<sup>140</sup> See also Fox and Starn, 1997:18 and Torney, 2005.

meaningful structure (social, organisational and symbolic) is created from the “creative cacophony” of which Castells (1997) writes (Cock, 2004). The stress on this process of consolidation was high within the organisational and mobilisation environment for WSF2004 and best describes the main contribution of the WSF to the Indian civil society and to the Indian social and political scenario. The following document, produced by the IS was used to formulate part of the campaign material for WSF2004. This document represents a sophisticated attempt to communicate the newness and originality of the WSF process in building this “international coalition” of the “emerging planetary civil society”

*To imagine that another world is possible is a creative act to make it possible. The WSF releases contradictions and makes them operate, catalyzing, liberating creative energies. (...) The WSF intends to be a space to facilitate pulling together and strengthening an international coalition of the most diverse social movements and organizations, adhering to the principle of respect for differences, autonomy of ideas, and forms of struggle. The Forum does not aim at being the sole space for convergence of the struggle against neoliberal globalization. (...) The strength of the Social Forum resides in its novelty. It's an initiative of the emerging planetary civil society. (...) It's a movement of ideas that feeds on human diversity and possibilities, opposing the "single way of thinking".(...) The WSF is a living laboratory for world citizenship (italics in the original)<sup>141</sup>.*

The message carried by this document is perfectly received and “translated” into practice in the Indian context. So, for instance, in the invitation letter for the Gujarat SF we read that

WSF 2004 will consolidate the coming together of social movements, mass organizations, NGOs,

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<sup>141</sup> Unpublished.



and other sectors that were brought together on one platform for the first time in the recent Indian history at ASF2003.

The main features of the translation processes are that it works at the borders, where differences touch; it is a process that involves both symbolic aspects and practices; it is motivated by the necessity to complement a perceived incompleteness felt by both the actors involved in the process; it is always performed by “special” individuals: leaders, activists, travellers, organic intellectuals; it happens in all social contexts but it expresses its best within controlled frameworks which, in turn, it helps create with its action (Santos, 2005). Translation is profoundly political and entails power dynamics and confrontations at times sharp as in WSF2004. Many of the conflicts in the framework of WSF2004 were mainly aiming at exposing power at making it visible (Melucci 1988) and make it come out of its neoliberal hideout where it conceals itself “behind the rationality of administrative or organisational procedures” (Melucci, 1988:249). The presence of deeply embedded forms of hidden power within the same WSF shows the complexity and the difficulty of the tasks of the global activists. These tensions often exploded within WSF2004 and the organisational structure was not always prepared to deal pro-actively (Chapter 6) with them and with those aspects of the political negotiation which come before politics as perfectly highlighted by Melucci:

There are two reasons why politics (...) is not the whole in social life: 1 There are structures and interests which precede, delimit and condition politics. (...) The political game never takes place on an open field with equal chances. (...). 2 There are dimensions of social phenomena, affective

or symbolic relationships, (...) which cannot be considered as political because they function according to a different logic (1988:251).

Translation, then, need to be anchored on a clear understanding of reasons that come before politics (structural, symbolic and affective): these need to be considered when designing organisational structures to facilitate translation in the WSF. Inter-cultural translation creates a convergence of discourses: political discourses used by international or local actors, belonging to trade unions, social movements, NGOs etc., come to converge in the “open space” of the WSF. These processes of convergence (hegemony) are mediated in the first place by processes of commensuration (Quine, 1969; Austin, 1975; Davidson, 1984), linguistic, cultural, political which are the core of the practices taking place within the WSF. The interplay between translation practices, conflict management, hegemonic processes, and information exchange, will be fully unfolded and analysed in chapters 5 and 6. There I show how the hegemony built and contested within the WSF takes place through political negotiations and practices of conflict management which, rather than expose structural and political imbalances, hide behind the “open space” discourse which is playing as a perfect hideout of neoliberal power and a Trojan horse for it as denounced by many.

A clear example of these dangers was observed in the translation system in Mumbai that should have allowed participants from more than 100 countries to actively participate in the activities of the forum. This case clearly exposes how translation, if not politically managed could, turn into a cause of fractures rather than positive negotiations of differences. In the translation context in WSF2004

were generated major technical failures, personal and political acrimonies, and grave deterioration of human relations together with considerable waste of human and financial resources. The questions raised by this topic are sufficiently important to deserve more careful attention elsewhere; however I will highlight here few points that will illustrate the main shortcomings of the experiment conducted in Mumbai on the translation system.

From the practical point of view the translation system in WSF2004 was a complete failure. The frustration of the volunteer translators reached at times levels that should create serious concerns to the organizers of an event like the WSF, and bitter exchanges of accusations between “translators” and “organizers”. The translation system used in Mumbai was an experimental yet extremely interesting project, the Nomad project, based on free software specifically developed by the members of the group Apo33 who joined Babels (an organisation of activists that provides translation to WSF events) to implement a complex integrated translation system that promised to be at the same time efficient and economic. Some of the main problems related to the translation system implemented in Mumbai can be summarized with the words of one of the IOC members: “In Mumbai a different system of translation (in fact a combination of two systems), which was much less expensive than that used in earlier Forums, was tried out. The systems did not function adequately, especially on the first day. Publicity about how to use the system and backup infrastructure was inadequate. As a result many who would have liked to participate in the large events, could not do so” (Sen Gupta et al., 2004).

The reasons why this failure happened can be summarised in a paradox: the translation process between translators on one side and organisers and office staff and volunteers on the other did not work. It was not, of course, a linguistic problem, it was not even only an organisational problem or a set of technical problems (translators accused organisers not to have provided them with the necessary infrastructure to perform their tasks, organisers accused translators of ineptitude). It was mainly a total lack of sensibility to cultural difference: the two sides of the conflict did not consider negotiating to the least their approach to the tasks at hand; and if the translators in frustration resorted to extreme displays of tension (throwing furniture out of the office window), the organisers limited their consideration to the following: “Babels people were resentful because they were not given a stipend whereas all the people who worked at the technical aspects of the translation system were paid”<sup>142</sup>. In this statement the cultural and political problems seem to disappear behind an economic one.

An early misunderstanding was generated in the encounter between “translators” and “organizers” around the status of Babels/Nomad: too often considered by the “organizers” as service providers, the “translators” thought of their role as a political one and fully integrated in the organizational process, whereas the “organisers” were rather jealous of their independence and did not allow interference of sort<sup>143</sup>. The situation of stress, the certainty of a low performance due to technical shortcomings, the frustration arising from the impossibility to

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<sup>142</sup> Mumbai IOC, 28-29 February, 2004 (personal notes).

<sup>143</sup> Hodgkinson (2005) for a critical assessment of Babels pretensions of horizontality.

address the problems, due to irreconcilable differences, lack of time and resources, caused the configuration of a confrontation that often bordered with intolerance and racism and ended up degenerating beyond repair.

The lessons to be drawn from this case study are related to the several components of the process of translation. If a technical knowledge of the linguistic and cultural code is of course fundamental, that is yet not sufficient. If translation is often perceived as loss and frustration this is again for political reasons rather than for practical ones, linked to inability to fully “express” the power carried by language. However, it is precisely by the negotiation and confrontation of those frustrations that the creative process which Sinha and Santos describe can take place.

#### **4. ‘Another World is Possible: The vision of the WSF**

What is this incredible strategic deployment of sophisticated counter-hegemonic and emancipatory tools (radical pedagogy, epistemological struggle, cultural translation) aimed to achieve? How would the “other world” the WSF activists are advocating look like? The hegemonic processes taking place in the WSF aim at building a shared political terrain and a shared cultural and ideological protocol. This project represents the mission of the WSF to reach its vision of an equal and just world. To ensure and gather the necessary momentum to successfully oppose neoliberalism and its agents, the WSF has strategically chosen to build a common vision designed not to expose differences but shared objectives. The result is drawn in fuzzy touches, but precisely in that fuzziness stands the strength of the

WSF (Kirkwood in Vargas 2004:229; Agnoletto, 2002). A strength based on a set of shared values consistent with those of critical cosmopolitanism aiming at replacing those on which neoliberalism is based. Those values are expressed in the Charter the approval of which constitutes the only condition for membership in the WSF.

At the core of the neoliberal epistemology is the belief that world society consists of individuals, that these individuals are free by nature and are only constrained by the limitations they voluntarily accept, that these individuals are rational actors and that they perform best in regimes of multiple choices such as free markets<sup>144</sup>; multiple choices in free markets induces competition, the necessary amoral good which in turn (via invisible hand) deliver the most cherished outcome: efficiency and improved quality of goods and services (Pollack, 1999; Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2002). In the Charter the outcomes of the spread of neoliberalism and its social effects are explained in terms of marginalisation and exclusion of the largest section of the world population. As Appadurai (2000) remind us social and epistemological exclusion are more and more tied to one another in a regime where technical, scientific and rational expertise define the rules of social and cultural interaction at the global level: inevitably the bearers of a different set of understandings (or cultures, or cosmologies) find themselves unable to interact meaningfully in the “global market” therefore sliding down the social ladder.

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<sup>144</sup> Individualism along with secularism and rationalism, is the foundation on which the destruction of other cultures have taken place and continue today along the expansion of the modern institutions of global market and governance: this process has been defined by Santos (1995) as the central feature of cultural imperialism and epistemicide as he observes the historical trajectory of the Western modernity.

Central to the WSF ideology is a strong sense of justice, which imposes radical changes to the current state of the world. The WSF has the means to oppose to the liberal value of justice (Rawls) one that is aware that it is not “possible ever to talk about justice as anything other than a contested effect of power within a particular place at a given time” (Harvey, 1996:329). A few paragraphs later we read “like space, time, and nature, “justice” is a socially constituted set of beliefs, discourses, and institutionalizations expressive of social relations and contested configurations of power that have everything to do with regulating and ordering material social practices within places for a time. Once constituted, the trace of a particular discursive conception of justice across all moments of the social process becomes an objective fact that embraces everyone within its compass” (330). It is possible to recognise these processes in the WSF space with reference to all fundamental political activities of value setting. Against the politics of naturalisation and de-politicisation of neoliberalism (Bourdieu, 2001; see also Rupert, 2005), the activists of the WSF claim a renewed role for politics in defining values and setting agendas for global change.

The set of core values of the WSF are listed in its Charter<sup>145</sup>. This is the most consistent attempt to propose a coherent framing<sup>146</sup> of the WSF. The importance of the Charter has to do also with its ability to connect the macro-level (globalisation) with the micro-level (individual injustice) and to create a shared set of guidelines and establishing the group’s goals (“another world”) and the appropriate means for reaching that goal: the corner stones on which the WSF

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<sup>145</sup> The Charter was issued after the first IC meeting in June 2001.

<sup>146</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996, Benford and Snow, 2000.

methodology is built are “difference”, the “open space”, and “non-violence” (Gilbert, 2005; Whitaker, 2005). For the WSF initiators the subscription to the Charter is the precondition of the association to the WSF. In India however, the Charter was perceived differently. The WSF2004 organizers argued that the Charter should only be a provisional reference to be surpassed later on in the process<sup>147</sup> by this stressing once more that values as strategies and goals are not set in stone once and for all but are always contested and outcome of a continuous process of struggle and negotiation. The Charter was circulated in India since 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002 and largely debated in the following months. The final conclusion was that the Charter did not fully represent the fundamental specificities of the Indian situation. The Charter was therefore adapted and a document based on the Charter was produced in Bhopal, April 2002, by the Indian Working Committee (IWC). This document was widely circulated with the title of “World Social Forum India: Policy Guidelines”. Those who drafted the Policy Guidelines of the WSF India, wanted to make sure that their main concerns, communalism and casteism were included in the Charter along with neoliberal globalisation and war<sup>148</sup>. The successful process by which the Charter was adapted to the Indian context proves the efficacy and flexibility of the WSF political and ideological culture.

On the basis of the values negotiated within the WSF, and expressed in the Charter, what would “another world” look like? The refusal to publish a unitary

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<sup>147</sup> WSF India (2002b) specifies that “all those who take part in the WSF (...) should be at least in *broad agreement* with the Charter of the WSF” (italic mine); this statement denounces the complexities that the adoption of the Charter created in India.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.: “We in WSF India have reinterpreted the Charter to address social and political reality as it exists in the country today”.



political manifesto, to set a precise agenda, to call for actions and the lack of concluding documents after each annual meeting make of this a rather elusive issue<sup>149</sup>. At one end of the ideological spectrum represented in the WSF, some activists denounce the limitations of a world meeting that does not deliberate with a precise objective in mind and without calling for specific actions. At the opposite end of the spectrum, others oppose the legitimacy of any unique vision. It is my contention that the unique agenda of the WSF movement will come about eventually as a result of a long process of negotiation and struggle among the actors involved in the WSF rather than by forcing one group's agenda over the others or simply denying the possibility of any convergence. In the meantime the collection of actions organised by the movements gathering in the WSF and coordinating thanks to the intense networking process facilitated by the WSF process, would constitute an approximation to the end result of those negotiations but also an effective tool to fight successfully neoliberalism without reproducing its logic of oppression and domination.

The vision for a better world advocated by the WSF, as defined in the vast literature produced within the WSF space, is a composite set of vectorially connected goals and strategies. Those ideas are linked to each other as the movements that foster them and are as many as those movements: the sum of those goals creates a galaxy of forces that too simplistically have been described

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<sup>149</sup> IOC list, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2003: "The WSF is, at times, accused of being a 'talking shop'. (...) The blueprint of "another world" is emerging, not just from the interactions in the WSF, but through debates, discussions, and most importantly struggles across the world. The WSF is only providing the opportunity to enrich these debates, to bring in a larger number of perspectives – some contending, some complementary. Not just that. It is providing the opportunity to build common strategies for struggles, to synergise energies that come together. Such synergies do not involve all those who come to the WSF, or even the majority in many cases. But such synergies are built.

in terms of dualistic oppositions or cleavages (Petras, 2002; Wallerstein, 2002; Teivainen, 2004)<sup>150</sup>. If polarised positions seem to be present the complex articulation of all of them (revolution and reform, modernity and tradition, East and West, North and South, Leninism and populism) impedes that any position could create an unbridgeable fracture (Santos, 2005). It is in the tension between complexity and polarisation that the most important cultural political battle is fought within the WSF<sup>151</sup>. This is the key feature of what Santos calls the epistemological struggle launched by the WSF. In fact, I also claim, the polarisation of the discourses in the WSF is instrumentally created for hegemonic political reasons and do not account for what the WSF really is. In this sense, any discourse arguing for a conflict among opposite views has to be understood as part of a political struggle to foster particular interests.

The result of all those political struggles is that the strategic counter-hegemony of the WSF is taking shape beyond the single visions of any of the movements involved in the WSF and towards a point resulting by the complex forces

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<sup>150</sup> Attempts at making this dualism more complex and able to describe features and trends of the WSF and of the world movement include Amin's (cited in Sansonetti, 2002) according to whom the WSF, unlike the movements of the 60s and 70s has been able to compose the conflict between reformism and revolution, the internal fight in the workers movement between the followers of Kautsky and those of Lenin. The problem now focuses on what kind of reformism is possible and desirable. Amin (Ibid.) proposes a distinction between radical and moderate reformism. The former proposes reforms that undermine the same fundamentals of the neo-liberal capitalism in a perspective that surpasses the same capitalism. The moderate reformism believes that a certain amount of liberalism is necessary (for instance for technological and scientific evolution) and tries to build a capitalism with a human face. Amin claims that one of the main strategic successes of the WSF would be to convince the liberal moderate to break their alliance with the right wing liberals and move towards the left.

<sup>151</sup> Marcon and Pianta (2002) suggest that three positions describe the political geography of the WSF with respect to neoliberal globalisation: co-operation with the objective of influencing the enlightened sectors of the international institutions and state governments; separation: the relation between social movements and international institutions must be conflictual; and open confrontation, the approach of those who consider international institutions impossible to reform and fight for their dismantlement. Anheier et al. propose a tetrahedron of positions (2001).

operating within it. This sophisticated counter-hegemony is the outcome of the elaboration and articulation of “global imaginations” (Burawoy 2000) in constant feedback loop processes at all levels from the local to the global. However, some broadly shared objectives are derived by the values of solidarity discussed above. Along with justice and freedom, equality, development, respect of cultural differences and democratic participation in running the *res publica* are the main objectives of this new political subject. If broadly shared though, these objectives are inevitably contested (Hardt, 2002; Ponnaya and Fisher, 2003).

How do these considerations on the vision of the WSF apply in the case of India and what were the contradictions between the Indian instantiation and others within the WSF? An ASF2003 event note read that “participants are opposed to imperialist globalisation as well as religious sectarian violence, and have a commitment to democratic values, plurality and peace” whereas a member of the IC (Vargas, 2004) would instead focus her description of the WSF as a “space for the affirmation, amplification and construction of rights in the global arena. (...) a space for widening democratic, subjective and symbolic horizons – for the recovery of a utopian perspective” (see also Vargas, 2005). In the Indian context the participants of the WSF “are working to identify and demonstrate that the path to sustainable development and social and economic justice does not lie in neoliberal globalisation but in alternative models for people-centred and self-reliant progress” (WSF India, 2003). Sustainable development, social and economic justice, neoliberal globalisation, alternative models, people-centred and self-reliant progress. This is what the WSF is all about read from an Indian

perspective. Activists and visionaries are invited to Hyderabad to: “take leadership in dialogue, discourse and design to formulate an Asian blueprint for building another world – a plural, just, responsible and shared world which accords equal dignity and rights to all its people”. A handbill circulated from July 2003 onwards makes interesting points to define the framework, political and institutional, of WSF2004:

The alternatives proposed at the WSF are strategies of defiance against the model of globalisation orchestrated by the large multinational corporations and by the national governments and IMF, the World Bank and the WTO that are the foot soldiers of these corporations. So an instrumentalist rather than a relative autonomy view. The WSF processes will respect universal human rights, and those of all citizens-men and women-of all nations. They will respect the environment and will rest on democratic international systems and institutions at the service of social justice, equality and the economic and political sovereignty of peoples.

The stress here is on the expressions: “nations”, “democratic international system and institutions”. Notwithstanding the principle according to which the WSF has no unique voice, it seems that the limit of the claims that the WSF actors can make is clearly set: the WSF will support the present “democratic international system and institutions” against the claims of the most radical participants of the forum who would rather abolish that system and those institutions. The events of September 2001 changed dramatically the world political outlook and some accused the WSF activists of having been unable to demonstrate enough flexibility and timely adaptive skills. Jain reflects that

The re-configuration of the world powers, the new hegemony, where location and religion

superseded the ownership of capital; where political leaders were unselfconscious in using the language of hate, where the sovereignty of nations was crumbling, and where conservatism in political leadership was being supported by citizens, did not challenge the intellectual speakers to re define globalisation. It was not moved from its simplistic characteristics of privatization and liberalization – to its new face of militarization, and unipolarity. (...) The potential within the peoples movements for entering the campaigns for electoral reform, for strengthening grassroots democracy, for releasing new energies into formal politics, through campaigns to fill the elected bodies, with women, excluded groups, leaders of movements for social justice- what Gandhi called constructive workers, was not central to the Agenda as the mood was anti State and therefore anti Politics (2004:291).

Let me summarise the outcome of the analysis so far conducted on the vision of the WSF. I claim here that the “Other world” advocated by the WSF can be described as a critically cosmopolitan world. Cosmopolitan thought has been revived along with the concept of civil society and the two concepts share the same flexibility and versatility but also the same limitations. I suggest that emancipatory cosmopolitanism of the kind discussed by Dussel, (2002), Mignolo (2000, 2000b), Hollinger (2001), and Pieterse (2006) best describes the vision of the WSF. I claim in this dissertation that the WSF has the potentiality to facilitate the creation of a set of political tools to enhance communication, interaction, intelligibility, differences recognition, conflict management and resolution, and to redress injustice and inequality at the global level (Burawoy, 2000; Calhoun, 2002). Mignolo’s analysis suggests looking at globalisation as “a set of designs to manage the world” (2000:721). In opposition critical cosmopolitanism is defined as “a set of projects toward planetary conviviality (721). Its strength stands in being a response to “the need to discover other options beyond both benevolent

recognition (Taylor 1992) and humanitarian pleas for inclusion (Habermas 1998)” (724). The cosmopolitanism he is advocating proposes, against a universal aprioristic view (usually of Greek or Enlightenment origin)<sup>152</sup>, a critical and dialogic process located in the colonial difference (741). This approach is based on border epistemology as constitutive of diversality (“diversity as a universal project” 2000:743). Mignolo has managed to find a legitimate position between the radical oppositions of universalism (a la Nussbaum, 2002) and pluralism (a la Kymlicka, 1995). In the attempt to connect the concept of species-wide community to politics, authors like Appiah (in the Cheah Robbins collection, 1998) explain how claims to tribe, nations and other particularistic social groups are not necessarily the outcome of opposition or hate, but a outcome of a need of belonging<sup>153</sup> that is not fully satisfied by global solidarities (Hollinger, 2001:239). In a particularly lucid passage Hollinger synthesises the finding of his research:

We can distinguish between a universalist will to find common ground and a cosmopolitan will to engage human diversity. For cosmopolitans, the diversity of humankind is a fact; for universalists it is a problem. Cosmopolitanism shares with universalism a suspicion of enclosures, but the cosmopolitan understands the necessity of enclosures in their capacity as contingent and provisionally bounded domains in which people can form intimate and sustaining relationships, and can indeed create diversity. (...) Another term the new cosmopolitans tend to avoid is pluralism. (...) cosmopolitanism is more liberal in style (...). Pluralism is more conservative in style: it is oriented to the pre-existing group, and it is likely to ascribe to each individual a primary identity within a single community of descent. (...) Cosmopolitans and pluralists are both advocates of diversity, but pluralists are more concerned to protect and perpetuate the cultures of

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<sup>152</sup> According to Hollinger, old cosmopolitanism “was insufficiently responsive to diversity, particularity, history, the masses of humankind, the realities of power, and the need for politically viable solidarities (2002:237).

<sup>153</sup> See the concept of “strategic communitarianism” by Spivak.

groups that are already well established at whatever time the ideal of pluralism is invoked, while cosmopolitans are more inclined to encourage the voluntary formation of new communities of wider scope made possible by changing historical circumstances and demographic mixtures. Cosmopolitans are specialists in the creating of the new, while cautious about destroying the old; pluralists are specialists in the conservation of the old while cautions about creating the new (239-40).

In the sense exposed by Mignolo, Beck, Pieterse, Dussel and Hollinger critical cosmopolitanism is still awaiting full realisation. In words that echo closely the values of the WSF Breckenridge et al. define cosmopolitanism as “a project whose conceptual content and pragmatic character are not only as yet unspecified but also must always escape positive and definitive specification, precisely because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an unc cosmopolitan thing to do” (2002:1). The WSF may constitute the strategic space for the construction of a truly, critically cosmopolitan, global civil society. Moreover, the WSF constitutes a privileged place for the constitution of a collective subject “while” in the process of political decision-making and action rather than prior to that process. Consequently that political decision-making practices and actions are about forming global solidarities not only about steering them (Calhoun, 2002).

Belonging to the same culture or having the same interest, are just some of the sources of solidarity but not the only ones, “functional integration, concrete social networks, and mutual engagement in the public sphere are also sources or dimensions of solidarity” (Calhoun, 2002:154). This last is different, because it is

an arena of choice in which solidarity is built through political discourse and practice rather than reproduce inherited status and power relations or being by-product of industrial production or market interaction; “beyond this, however, the engagement of people with each other in public is itself a form of social solidarity” (Calhoun, 2002:162). Engagement in the WSF is based on political (hegemonic) negotiations and these “challenge not only nationalist pressures to conform, but also technocratic insistence on the application of expertise, as though such expertise (or the science that might lie behind it) embodies perfect, unchanging, and disinterested solutions to problems” (Calhoun, 2002:165).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I engaged three main themes: the identity of the WSF, its strategies to create a global consensus against neoliberalism and its alternative vision to replace it (Anthony and Silva, 2005). In the first section of the chapter I concluded, along Gill's lines, that the WSF is a “a complex element of society' that is beginning to point towards the realization of a 'collective will” (Gill, 2000), but hasn't yet done so. The movement that sprang from the Seattle uprising is moving towards a possible reformulation as a, paraphrasing Gramsci, “Post-Modern Prince”; a global political entity that contains in itself the multitude of actors of GCS. In Gill's words, “A political party as well as an educational form and a cultural movement. However it does not act in the old sense of an institutionalized and centralized structure of representation” (2000:173). The WSF is a constellation of networks organised around shared interests and solidarities.



These foundational grounds have produced an institutional structure that is leading the process of alliance building according to the hegemonic strategy discussed in the second section of this chapter. There I suggested that the construction of the global counter-hegemony to neoliberalism is based on a laborious political process of struggle and consensus building. The instruments mobilised by the WSF towards the construction of such alliance against neoliberalism are based on self-education, radical pedagogy and a highly sophisticated epistemological struggle. All these strategies have their foundations in practices of cultural and linguistic translation which itself is a deeply political process. In the third section of this chapter I discussed the vision of the WSF and I proposed that it is along the lines of an emancipatory cosmopolitanism that challenges the process of naturalisation of neoliberalism and extols cooperation against competition, community values against radical individualism, human relationships over consumerism and solidarity over the survival of the fittest with in mind a convivial and peaceful world.

## Chapter 4. The ‘Open Space’

The mission of the WSF is to create a strong global alliance against neoliberalism. The privileged strategic tool devised by the initiators of the WSF to create that alliance is the “open space”. Described as the main innovation it has introduced in the global political arena (Whitaker, 2005; Sen, 2004), the open space, its nature, potentialities and limitations, is the focus of the present chapter. I discuss the open space as an analytical concept, a normative aspiration and a mobilising tool. I conclude that however it has proved to be a formidable mobilising tool<sup>154</sup> both at the national (here I focus on the Indian case) and at the global level, and although it accurately expresses some of the implications of the critical cosmopolitan vision of the WSF, it nonetheless risks to produce more harm than good to the WSF. This would be the case if these two aspects are not clearly separated from its analytical presumptions which, I show here, are widely unjustified and create illegitimate expectations on the nature of the WSF. The open space aspires to be the privileged environment in which the epistemological struggle against neoliberalism takes place. I claim here instead that whereas the epistemological struggle is potentially the most effective tool of the emancipatory global civil society to fulfil its vision, however the legitimacy of the WSF resides in its ability to directly address with success its more immediate vision of counter-hegemony building. This task has to be facilitated through a political process lead by

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<sup>154</sup> Patomaki and Teivainen: “Meena Menon (...) ridiculed the idea that open space is a post-modern concept. The method of the WSF is not a philosophical but a practical question. The open space of the WSF works well in bringing the activists together and that is its justification (2004:149).

strategic leadership (Gramsci, 1971). Leadership as a concept and leaders as political agents are looked at with enormous suspicion in the WSF setting, but they nonetheless are present and actively shape the WSF. I discuss this contradiction in the final section of this chapter. I conclude that the open space is not an analytically robust concept but rather a powerful mobilising tool in the hands of the WSF leadership.

### **1. The Open Space in India**

The “open space” is the most important and elusive concept introduced by the WSF. The introduction of the concept of open space in India involved an intense negotiation between the different actors associated with ASF2003 first and later with WSF2004, to establish a shared understanding of its nature, political importance and use. In the following paragraphs I recount the process through which the Indians involved in the WSF process appropriated the new concept. That process allowed them to, on one side, explore its potentialities as a powerful mobilising tool and, on the other, expose some crucial analytical limitations related to its conceptual fuzziness, and its normative aspirations.

I argue here that the interaction within the new context gave the concept of “open space” the necessary critical feedback to make of it a more contested but more usable discourse than it was originally. In Brazil and Europe it seemed to have a set of obvious characteristics that did not need being discussed. In Brazil the open space referred to the environment in which the articulation of different members

of the national civil society had negotiated, over three decades, their role in the alliance against the dictatorship. The construction of the WSF within that space seemed obvious continuation of that process and its extension to a much broader dimension. In Europe, especially in Italy and France, the vicissitudes of the Latin American struggles were felt strongly. The process of alliance building defined by the open space was practised in their local political environment (Sansone, 2002) and this constituted a shared political sensibility to the main feature of the WSF. In India instead, political conflicts and imbalanced power dynamics between sectors of the local civil society (see chapter 2) made the concept of open space impervious at the beginning, albeit inspiring. The need to travel over again the stages that lead to the elaboration of the open space in Brazil, allowed a thorough analysis of the concept. The process exposed its limitations, referred to above and discussed in what follows, but it also confirmed its strategic strengths. Moreover, the re-elaboration of a concept with a specific national history by the global membership of the WSF (via the unpacking that the open space had to undergo in India), created the premises for a recursive process of local/global interactions indispensable to fully instantiate the normative aspiration of a truly global civil society. I will look in this section into those processes through which the “open space” was perceived, unpacked, bent, challenged, reformulated and, finally, appropriated in the daily practices of WSF2004.

The “open space” was a new discursive representation of a political space with which not many Indian activists were familiar due to the relative lack of direct engagement with the Latin American milieu in which it was elaborated. It took the

Indians some time to first grasp and later conform to the new tool<sup>155</sup>. In an attempt to facilitate the Indian debate on the WSF and its nature, the IS shared with the Indian organisers an introductory document on the “open space”. The text of this document represents a sophisticated attempt to communicate the newness and originality of the WSF process and it has special relevance here because it exposes some crucial differences in the political processes in Brazil and India.

Diversity, not size, is its fundamental political mark. (...). The WSF deals with issues of globalization and neoliberalism, imperialism, militarization and war, and mainly with possibilities and alternatives at the level of the concrete economy, construction of democracies and new subjects, and confronting violence and intolerance in human relations. Above all it intends to develop a social outlook for everything. (...) The term “social” in the Forum’s name is more than an adjective, it is a world vision. (...) The WSF (...) does not have the objective of defining a hegemonic political orientation, nor to create levels of political power to lead them. (...) *In the WSF, disagreement is a virtue, not a problem. (...) we are also a multiplicity of forms of thinking: through the emotion of drama, singing, music, dancing, image, celebration, or through the rationality of arguments, conferences, essays, roundtables and panels, seminars, and workshops* (...). The WSF (...) is a kind of university for world citizenship. (...) Along with thinking, we develop feeling and emotion. (...) *The WSF is a space to address and enhance dreams, ideas, experiences, and movements.* (...) No one has had any experience in meeting and sharing with such a range of diverse collective subjects (...). We are still developing the necessary pedagogy (...). *The WSF is a hallmark in recent world history. (...) The changes it provokes may have immediate practical effect or, more likely, will impact the way of perceiving and assessing possibilities and constraints of humankind’s action in its diverse situations relations, structures, cultures, and historical processes.* (...) WSF impact and expansion depend, to a large extent, on how our way of reflecting on the world impacts the large media (...). *The Charter of Principles is a key piece in*

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<sup>155</sup> WSF India, 2002: “Since the nature of this ‘space’ is different from what most of us are used to organising and building – such as conferences, conventions and platforms, where we try to come together and speak in one voice”.

*WSF political engineering. The ethical values uniting us and the extent of our diversity are defined in it. In our Charter of Principles, consciousness of humanity and shared planetary common good are paramount, as well as the search for sustainable development based on participation, freedom, and human dignity (italics in the original)*<sup>156</sup>.

This is an example of the political language that Brazilian activists distilled in 30 years of shared engagement and activism (Thayer, 2000; Alvarez, 1998) and reflects the broad coalitions that most Latin American countries formed in the anti-dictatorship movements (Alvarez et al., 1998). This is a holistic political message that aims at strategically including anything within its framework in a most ecumenical language that talks dream and rational thought, imperialism and world citizenship, in the same paragraph, in an attempt to show how from conflicts, clashes, confrontations a new world can see the light. The main limitation of such a discourse, and the main limitation of the open space concept, is that it does not acknowledge the power imbalances of the carriers of different world views (as those based on dreams or those based on rational thought), insofar diluting often the importance of the political in the process of designing their vision and reducing considerably the analytical insight into the nature of those coalitions and the tools they use. In what follows I discuss how the Indian activists made of the open space and the WSF framework out of their own struggles and their experiences.

The first document produced by the WSF India process was the Bhopal declaration. That document introduced the WSF to Indian activists, established the

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<sup>156</sup> WSF IS, 2003.

conditions for the engagement of the Indians in the global movement, considered the need for such an event to take place in India and reflected on conjuncture and possible gains to be gotten from the WSF in India. The central idea of the WSF is described thus: “the creation of a *space* for everyone to come together with a respect for that space”. The coming together of activists within that space does not force them to agree on anything else than the protocol of participation in that space: the WSF will not have a “common political manifesto on which all those who participate have to agree”.

If the concept of “space” was vague at that point, a number of synonyms and metaphors were used to convey the meaning: the WSF is an “arena”<sup>157</sup> a “convention”<sup>158</sup> “a platform of public opinion”<sup>159</sup>, a “new vanguard”<sup>160</sup>, a “forum”<sup>161</sup>, an “open forum”<sup>162</sup>, an “international solidarity forum”<sup>163</sup>, an “unstructured and non-hierarchical alliance”<sup>164</sup>, “not an organization, not a united front platform”<sup>165</sup>.

The openness of the forum is such due to its not being circumscribed by a specific ideological position, other than what is laid down in the Charter. (...) The WSF takes no responsibility to homogenise these positions and push for a common position. But the very opportunity the space provides, may (and does), lead to common positions being forged between different groups or (...). It is a space that is contentious – by definition. Because the WSF is an open space there are such a

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<sup>157</sup> WSF India, 2002.

<sup>158</sup> Minutes of the Bihar SF meeting, September 2003.

<sup>159</sup> Information Kit for MOC meeting October, 2003.

<sup>160</sup> WSF Diary published by Heinrich Boell Foundation, India.

<sup>161</sup> See WSF India, 2003.

<sup>162</sup> Event note for ASF2003 (December 2002).

<sup>163</sup> IOC list, October 2003.

<sup>164</sup> IOC list, November, 2003.

<sup>165</sup> IOC list, May 2003.

large number of diverse opinions that contend with each other. (...) If the WSF were an organisation, such diversity of positions would make it dysfunctional. (...) this is precisely why the WSF should not be an organisation. The very large and increasing participation (...) has been possible because of the diversity that the WSF allows. This does not mean that organisations with clear positions and ideologies are not required<sup>166</sup>.

According to the Bhopal document, the “open space” of the WSF risks to look fragmented from the outside. For this fragmentation to be recomposed it has to be accepted that within that space all possible shades of strategic understanding of the main struggle are welcomed: “those who propose dialogue, and others who believe only in confrontation”. The document considers WSF2004 a great opportunity in order to “initiate a process of dialogue between different tendencies, to build up processes of exposure and mutual education, a process that can only enrich and strengthen us all”. Dialogue, self-education, and strengthening of the alliances among the participants are the crucial objectives of the WSF: they are the key features of the “open space” as detailed in the writings of the WSF main initiators (Whitaker, 2003). Although the document leaves open the possibility that the WSF could catalyse the creation of a broad platform for direct political engagement it makes clear that this is not its specific objective. As mentioned already the Bhopal document was the introduction of the ‘open space’ conceptualisation of the WSF to a wider Indian audience. The further process of outreach during the run up to ASF2003 and later WSF2004 was characterised by an intense production of campaign and political documents discussing the nature of the WSF. Those documents were mainly aiming at informing new participants

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<sup>166</sup> WSF India, 2003.



about the objectives of the WSF and the innovative tools it had devised. Those documents were instrumental in addressing fundamental controversies among different actors of the Indian civil society (especially around the political relevance and radicalism of this new framework) and to mobilise people to join “the process of conceiving and constructing alternatives to globalisation in Asia”<sup>167</sup>.

One of the harshest controversies that the campaign material had to address was the one between those who understood the WSF as a talking shop with no political relevance (to this group belong radical left organisations generally associated with, but not limited to, the CPI-ML – Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist), and those who conformed to the mission of the “open space” as a framework for alliance building rather than direct political actor (sensitive to the counter-hegemonic potentialities of such a convergence were, on one side, the NGO sector and on the other side the activist of the more centrist Communist parties – CPI-M, and CPI – and the mass organisations and trade unions linked to those parties). The controversy was often unpacked along the following lines: intellectual elaboration around the ills of neoliberalism is part of a process of self-education which can be considered in itself to be political action, and can generate social change. This Gramscian argument was recurrent in the material circulated in the run up to WSF2004. Critical pedagogy and activists self-education, as detailed in those documents, rather than direct confrontation aiming at the realisation of a specific political goal, are the key features of the “open space”.

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<sup>167</sup> Campaign brochure for ASF2003, autumn 2002.

The complexity of the new actor, created more and more contrasting and at times confusing definitions. In a call for a women's meeting to be held in Mumbai the WSF is defined as a "world-wide movement" and few days later in another call for the same meeting the WSF "is a world-wide platform, an open space for dialogue and debate". Moreover the WSF is "an open space where a 'meeting of minds' takes place across different sectors"<sup>168</sup>. Later, in the call to join the Maharashtra SF, the WSF is described as follows:

The WSF is an amalgamation of social movements, voluntary organizations, trade unions, individuals and groups at a global level. (...) In Maharashtra through the WSF there is an ardent need to mobilize a people's movement based on the ideologies of Shahu, Phule, Ambedkar, Marx, Gandhi and Lohia<sup>169</sup>.

As one of the WSF2004 organisers put it "the WSF process is different from 'organisation building' that many of us are familiar with"<sup>170</sup>. The WSF activists claim to be part of a process that in its nature is other than a political party or any other formalised political or civil organisation. Was this claim legitimate? Is the WSF India elaborating a new organisational formation, perhaps along the lines suggested by Gill (2000) as discussed earlier in this dissertation (see chapter 3)? In other words, is the process taking place in India radically different from any previous attempt at coalition building in the sub-continent? Was the diffidence of many actors (see the diffidence of NAPM discussed in chapter 2) due to the

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<sup>168</sup> March and April 2003.

<sup>169</sup> IOC list, April 2003.

<sup>170</sup> IOC list, May 2003.

difficulty in understanding the implications of the open space concept? Or was that diffidence expressing doubts on the real genuineness of the motivations of some Indian organisers? Were those organisers stating to be facilitating the creation of the open space in India, or were they leading the construction of a political coalition to be eventually manipulated according to their specific political goals?

The process of negotiation of the meaning of “open space” and the nature of the WSF became soon more confidently managed by the Indian organisers, who felt that their contribution to the WSF process had to be more than simply preparing the field for the “open space” to enter India in the form in which it had been elaborated in Brazil and then adopted in the other events of the WSF framework. A more proactive and creative attitude was taken as witnessed by the following passage:

In India many groups had expressed the need to innovate on the present structure of the WSF process, while retaining its essence. It was agreed that the events in India, drawing upon experiences in the country regarding large mass campaigns, would not limit itself to a large event. Rather the event itself would be seen as the culmination of a process that would reach out and involve large numbers from diverse sections. The way the WSF in India was conceived was that the process of organising events and activities across the country was seen to be as important as the event itself. (...) These processes, in the spirit of the WSF, would be open, inclusive and flexible and designed to build capabilities of local groups and movements and also seeking to leverage on the individual strengths of such groups and movements. (...). It was also decided that

given the nature of the religious sectarian attacks and the caste oppression, WSF India would be open only to those who affirm an inclusionary vision and not sectarian and casteist agenda<sup>171</sup>.

The “open space” then is an inquisitive pedagogical process. Within it, differences are the main asset and fragmentation is not perceived as dysfunctional, but rather expresses plurality and creativity. However, autonomy and freedom within the “open space” need some degree of co-ordination. Such co-ordination should not, however, be prescriptive, but designed to build and synergise capabilities of local groups and movements and also seek to leverage on the individual strengths of groups and movements who are partners in the process<sup>172</sup>.

The contradictions generated by the stated openness of the WSF space and its real constitution were the topic of the most heated debates. It was finally recognised that the “open space” was not open in absolute terms but it had boundaries. The condition of openness of the WSF was then relative and established by the principles that guided its membership rules.

It is an open space that is circumvented by the boundary condition that the space is open to all who stand in opposition to neo-liberal economic policies and imperialism. Moreover, in India, we have further circumvented this open space saying that it stands in opposition to: patriarchy, war, casteism and racism, and communalism (...) it is possible that this broadening of the canvas has also drawn into the WSF, as a part of its heterogeneous character, groups and organisations whose primary focus is not the struggle against imperialist globalisation. But it is preferable to have such

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<sup>171</sup> WSF India, 2003.

<sup>172</sup> WSF India, 2002.

groups come in and preserve the current heterogeneity than try and build a monolithic movement with a common agenda, which may immediately lead into competing agendas<sup>173</sup>.

The newness of the open space concept and its analytical fuzziness create further complexities, which I here briefly illustrate. At the IOC meeting in May, one of the suggestions given by the assembly to the coordinators of the mobilisation group was to “take into account issues of the concept of open space, of the lack of political rigour”<sup>174</sup> in that concept. In a presentation for the press in Mumbai in early September the expression 'open space' is used with reference to the programme of the WSF: “A variety of open spaces form the backbone of the programme reflecting the free and democratic spirit of the WSF”. Here the concept of 'open space' is used in its metaphoric way for what concerns its relation to the programme, but it is also used in its literal sense because the expression makes reference to the fact that 'open spaces' at the venue would give the opportunity to the participants to create “various performances, exhibitions, music, poetry reading, discussions, galleries, gardens, food-courts, etc.”. The enthusiasm of the organisers and their sophisticated understanding of the strategic and tactical utility of the new concept had to, sooner or later, clash with the documented lack of coherence and with the natural disposition of the “open space” to be bent to all sorts of convenient uses. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of October a very interesting letter is circulated in the organisational mailing lists by the publisher of an Indian newsletter on social change and democracy:

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<sup>173</sup> IOC list, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2003.

<sup>174</sup> Minutes of the Meeting.

This business of 'open space and everyone working' means no one is responsible or contactable for any specific needs. I have been around since last 6 months volunteering my services, as a web editor, I know a thing or two about what need to be written, updated etc. It is extremely frustrating to just hang around in the office. (...) No more meetings, just action, I think is what is needed. Fast.

Accountability, transparency, responsibility and action seem to be lacking in WSF. This is a strong attack to the very core of the entire process. This person had a very strong point also. As I could witness the pace of the work was extremely slow and the justification for this was always: "its process first, before outcome". In fact, as I soon understood, "process" and "open space" were often used to remove inquisitive attention from the real issues that the mentioned email was hinting at: continuous struggle for leadership of the WSF India process were taking place in both the administrative and political spaces of WSF2004. In fact, the letter reported above was denouncing one characteristic of the open space that had not escaped many critics: the "open space" is "open" to interpretations and autonomous action by single actors within the organisational process. This induces arbitrary interpretations and reinforces political imbalances skewed in favour of those who traditionally are better trained at using discursive tools for their hegemonic interests. In India those accused more often of being able to play the open space better for their political interests were some big Indian NGOs enjoying important international funding, and the traditional organisations linked to the communist parties. All those who felt relegated to marginal roles did not fail to expose the ills of the organisational "process". Several cases exposed preferential communication justified on the basis of the openness of the platform and autonomy of the actors within it. In other words, this very often simply meant

that no one could limit in any way the actions of the others, even when they appeared to be hegemonic, or lacked transparency, accountability, democracy as denounced in the letter above.

This kind of selective attitude to openness and inclusiveness not only exposes some limitations of the WSF2004 process. It also shows some key weaknesses of a concept of open space. I suggest that the concept of "open space" does not have much theoretical solidity and it replaces that with its mobilising power and its suggestive aspirational projection. The openness of the Indian process has received several attacks. Some have been circulated (often for the instrumental reason to prove one's point, rather than for the genuine desire to deal with the problems) in the IOC list. One of them, from Australia, was particularly tough on the overall Indian set up:

I, and many of my friends and colleagues, have great reservations of where exactly the Indian WSF organisers are at and if it worth supporting/participating in the WSF in Mumbai. When the process started of getting WSF 2004 together, all attempts to find out when and where the meetings were held were ignored and unanswered (...). While in Mumbai a few months ago, we tried to make an appointment with people in the organising committee and were put off by various excuses. Any attempts made by us to be involved in the process of organizing this event (...) were blocked. (...) it appears that the Indian committee is acting as an iron-fist politburo. (...) an important issue to bring to people's attention is the hierarchy and lack of democratic process that existed within the forum. Wealthier NGO's got the greater platforms; the poor people's movements were marginalized. The volume of your voice depended entirely on the amount of rupees you had to offer<sup>175</sup>.

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<sup>175</sup> IOC list, November 2003.

The following incident which involved a Dalit leader and the coordinators of the Programme Functional group (PG) and the Venue and Logistics group (V&L), illustrates further some instrumental uses made of the “open space” and the highly political nature of the interactions that took place within it. On the 21<sup>st</sup> July, one of the Dalit leaders wrote to the IOC list addressing the PG and exposing how some of the IOC members were deliberately being excluded by some of the official communication on the WSF2004 programme: this attitude was labelled as an attempt at “monopolising space”, rather than to open the WSF space to all interested actors, as the subject line of the email stated.

Delhi Programme Committee did not propose, it decided four additional Sectoral Conferences. (...) Programme has captured all the four conference[s] (...). The reason advanced that additional conferences would be overlapping and disrupt the panel discussion is highly objectionable. WSF is an open space, no one organises programme, panels, or activities to disrupt the activities of others. (...) The second decision (...) is also very insulting, not only for those who are actively involved in WSF, but the whole concept of OPEN SPACE AND TRANSPARENCY. Following is the decision: “It was decided that just the broadest possible themes be presented to the IC, along with some information about the impact, struggles etc. This is because too many details would lead to confusion”. (...) The reason advanced in the minute smacks the secrecy and conspiracy. (...) You should be advocating the openness and transparency, not involving in hide and seek game that you have carried out in Mumbai. I am forwarding your mail to IC members so that they know the larger conspiracy by a bunch of facilitators to derail the whole concept of WSF India process (...). I see no reason except deliberate attempts to thwart the attempts of the Dalits, Blacks, and all those discriminated people (...). This is not with Dalits only. It is happening with Women, too. All the four conferences that WSF seeks to corner, does not mention women even for the name sake. With casteism, racism removed from the main conference, this makes a deadly combination. Is it an



effort to appease SHIV SENA IN MUMBAI OR is there any pact between the organisers and Shiv Sena of not touching issue of Caste/Women, the two eyesores of Brahmanism? (...) WSF, which has open and transparent process is being hegemonised by organised conspiracy of political groups with secret pacts among their representatives in WSF.

This long passage (rather difficult to decipher too to the reader not familiar with the character of the WSF communication language) exposes a set of fundamental problems of WSF2004 and helps elucidate the appreciation by the Indian activists of the open space discourse. Let me summarise briefly the allusions and direct accusations moved to a specific section of the organising committee by the Dalit activist. The main attacks are directed at the members of the CPI and CPI-M which hegemonised the PG and the Delhi office of WSF India. The “hide and seek” practices are part of the hegemonic processes lead by the members of the communist parties involved in WSF2004. The outcome of those practices is the marginalisation of caste and gender issues. The further virulent attack, the worst possible to be made in the Indian context, referred to the alleged submission to the will of the Hindu fundamentalists when choosing the themes of the programme for WSF2004. It is interesting also in this context to briefly refer to the role, real and imagined, played by the global partners of WSF2004, here the IC, which function as court of last resort for the resolution of a conflict of national relevance (see chapter 7). The accusations voiced by the Dalit activist launched a vibrant debate.

The first reactions came from two women activist who voice their reservations to the previous message. They claim independence for the women's movement and

define the attitude of the Dalit leader as “rather bureaucratic or unduly legislative”<sup>176</sup> and express “dismay at what seem to be avoidable conflicts”<sup>177</sup>. Moreover, by fully recognising the difficulty in integrating all the suggestions in the final programme they partially justify the selective behaviour of the programme group PG. The exchange continues: the Dalit leader insists in a new email that the terms adopted as title of a conference do not fully represent the marginalisation suffered by the Dalits: “exclusions and discrimination does not fully convey what Race and Castes perpetuate”<sup>178</sup>. Moreover, he provocatively asks: “Open Space should remain OPEN. But how this could be possible when all the major conferences would be organised by WSF's official structure? I do not mean that WSF should not organise events. But why all of a particular kind?”. The point made here is again a criticism of the hegemonic practices by the members of the communist parties which occupied all the strategic places in the decision making process about the final programme of WSF2004. Their ideological preference to issues of class inevitably clash (as detailed in this exchange) with the caste issues fought against by the Dalits. Later in the same letter he states that “WSF's role is to facilitate the open space and make sure it is not cornered by anyone, including by itself. But the present format does exactly opposite to this”. The hegemonic practices here reported were indeed at odds with the “open space” discourse. The main contradiction witnessed in India was the strict authoritarianism with which hegemony was understood and performed. The control over physical and political spaces, languages and decision-making processes went often beyond the boundaries of a necessary cohesive leadership. I

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<sup>176</sup> IOC list, June 2003.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

discuss in detail the hegemonic practices at play in India in chapter 5. Let me here return to the conflict between the PG and the Dalit activist. A further intervention by a member of the PG exposes another fundamental contradiction of the “open space” concept.

We have to agree that the Program Committee has also certain rights and if they did make changes in Mumbai on issue of program, they have the right to do so. In fact Program Committee is answerable to IWC and not IOC. (...) I think the issue we have to address is finally some set of people will organise the major events. Whether it is done by WSF organisers or by WSF organisers accepting certain proposals, both will demand a role from the organisers<sup>179</sup>.

In this sense, the PG member, among those at the centre of not only this specific attack but several others along the same lines, explains how the “role of the organisers” must be one of direction. The decisions about “accepting certain proposals” are, supposedly, not allowed in the WSF “open space”. The role of “the organisers” is only to confirm that the organisers of each event conform in their practices and beliefs to the Charter, not to decide on what will be scheduled. In fact, in India (as in previous years) a number of events were centrally organised. Those events were held in huge conference rooms of up to 9000 seats. The crucial importance of those events justifies the struggle for their allocation. The conflict related here is one of those struggles for space and visibility at WSF2004. The final list of the big events in Mumbai confirms what denounced here and elsewhere about the domination (not always an amicable strategic leadership) by members of the Indian communist parties.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

The case here discussed substantiates my argument about the ambiguity of the “open space” as a strategic tool. Its use and the outcomes of its use, depend in a very important way on the social and political context in which it is implemented. Forms of social and political exclusion that characterise Indian society, inevitably permeated the WSF India process. Moreover, the lack of a consistent definition of the open space and of the practices that should be performed within it by “the organisers” of the local events, have produced considerable conflict. These issues raise fundamental questions on the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion in WSF2004 and in the WSF in general and the analytical and strategic accuracy and usefulness of the “open space” concept. In what follows I discuss some of those issues and their implications.

## **2. Criticisms of the ‘Open Space’ 1: on ‘Openness’**

In the previous section I discussed the conflicts generated by the ambiguity of the open space concept in WSF2004. In what follows I engage more directly with the theoretical debate on the “open space”. The openness of the Indian space has been challenged by scholars and activists exposing important power dynamics and structural conditions that regulated inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the process and of the event (Khan, 2004; Daulatzai, 2004). The open space was not only challenged at the methodological level but also at the practical level as both a tool for inclusion and consensus building and as a description of the event space. The same venue of WSF2004 created several problems to the “open space” concept in

its Mumbai incarnation: acoustic pollution, escalation, noise, absence of information, collapse of communication, were some of the issues that made of the Nesco grounds a largely chaotic space. Other exclusions, more dramatic than the impossibility for many to hear the proceedings of the seminars and conferences could be observed in Mumbai: Dalits, youth, women, Muslims, non-English speakers, less technologically literate individuals and Adivasi were often pushed at the margins of the physical, social and political territory of the WSF. Some of the proposals advanced to limit the exclusion and broaden the inclusion of WSF2004 were along the following lines: "If we could have an organised openness to welcome all different groups, we would have avoided disappointment of certain groups and parallel programmes"<sup>180</sup>. Approaches like this defeated the aspirations of those who articulated the "open space" concept in the first place and exposed all its limitations.

I investigate here if those limitations of the open space in India were due to inherent flaws in the theoretical understanding of the open space, to practical reasons related to the inability to implement it correctly, or to specific political motivations of the organisers and the clashes of those. Although often these motivations are inseparable in real world, I will focus more in this chapter on the theoretical shortcomings of the open space as a concept. I discuss hegemonic politics in the next chapter and the practical limitations of the concept in the organisational space of the Mumbai office in chapter 6. I start by reviewing the debate on the nature of the open space.

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<sup>180</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

For Whitaker (2005b) and Santos (2005), the “open space” is a space with no leaders, a socially horizontal and public place, one where power dynamics are not present to spoil the full interaction of all those animating that space (Whitaker, 2004). According to De Angelis (2004), instead, the openness of the WSF is not absolute because the organisational identity of the WSF is internally conflictual due to the co-habiting of at least two opposite tendencies within it that he calls the horizontal and the vertical organisational culture. These produce opposite power dynamics that clash creating an incommensurable fracture in the WSF in the long run. The two organisational cultures find full expression in the interest of the “horizontal” (autonomous, anarchist and independent from traditional parties organisations) for the WSF as a process and of the “vertical” (left parties) for the WSF as an event in which they can maximise their political purposes of proselytism and political bargaining. Their approach to the WSF is therefore managerial in order to maximize the success (turnout) of the event. The same argument is shared by Sen (2004d) in his analysis of the shortcomings of the Indian process due to the hegemony imposed on it by the CPI-M, as discussed above and later in chapter 5, and its managerial approach to ASF2003 and WSF2004 Mumbai. According to this view the open space is not the entirety of the WSF space but only a part of it (represented mainly by small groups often of libertarian politics). This section of the WSF is in constant tension with those who instead inhabit a closed space of “old” politics, represented by communist and workers' parties offshoot organisations, trade unions, peasant organisations and large NGOs (see below). This tension represents, in fact, the actual condition of

the WSF but could be surpassed if the new politics of the WSF won over the other portion. Among the horizontals, leadership does not have an authoritarian character and politics is played openly and democratically, so it is not the case among the verticals, who struggle not only with the horizontals but also among them to gain leadership within the WSF.

Given the conflictual tendencies present within the WSF, building the open space should be the main objective of the WSF process claim Waterman (2003, 2003c, 2005) and Sen (2003a and 2005c). For these authors the stress is then on the aspirational/normative dimension of the open space. For them, to fully explore the openness of the WSF and the potentialities of the open space concept, this has to be based on norms and principles themselves openly negotiated and decided upon rather than on gentlemanly or comradely agreements between a selected group of leaders<sup>181</sup>. This debate among crucial intellectuals and activists engaged in the WSF summarises the fundamental claims about the nature of the open space:

- it is a space which gathers organisations and social movements of the radical GCS;
- it is a contested space between those who believe in the previous statement and those who perform “old” hegemonic strategies to gain leadership and control over the WSF;
- it is an aspiration to be realised: that of a space with no power relations and leadership.

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<sup>181</sup> Sen, 2003a: “The present policy in WSF India of simply declaring meetings open does not necessarily make the process open or the participants accountable”.

The first definition is descriptive and fails to represent the political nature of the WSF. The second approach is more analytical but it fails to explain the complexities of the WSF beyond a rather simplistic dialectical opposition between two radically opposite actors. The third definition is fundamentally normative and says more about how the open space should look like than about how it is. I argue here instead that:

- although the WSF does not have a strong formal leadership that follows a determined political ideology, within its space has taken shape a core of self-appointed leaders that have considerable influence over the organisational and political decision-making processes
- the WSF has an institutional, social and political structure that is inevitably based on unequal distribution of resources (material resources, information, knowledge): the struggle for the appropriation of those resources and the participation in the decision making processes for the allocation of those resources generates power dynamics
- The aspirations of the WSF, as expressed in its vision cannot be realised in the future if the above issues are not dealt with in the present.

The excessive stress on the normative aspects of the open space is completed by a misleading descriptive dimension and a limited critical investigation. The skewed balance between normative and analytical debates needs to be redressed in order to better understand the WSF. I propose here that a more accurate empirical



investigation can provide fundamental critical insights on the referent of the open space concept. In fairness, the quality of the intellectual debate on the open space is steadily improving as of late. For instance, against the naïve pretension of the WSF as a pure open space Biccum (2005) argues for a contradictory and contested space (between for instance opposite hegemonic actors or between those who want to colonise the WSF space to direct it and those who struggle to impede that this happens) full of productive ambivalences (the inevitable conflicts between the two groups generate fundamental synthesis and surpassing of previous opposition). But these contradictions need to be fully exposed and negotiated, or struggled for, instead of being kept separated within the WSF to avoid “running the risk of their conceptual collision, of exposing their structural relationship, the causal relationship” (120)<sup>182</sup>.

## **2.1 Inclusion/Exclusion in the Open Space**

The idea behind “openness”<sup>183</sup> perfectly represents the aspirations of the cosmopolitan ideal of a fully inclusive world society that would welcome and nurture each individual’s identity and creativity. The Charter focuses on the counter-hegemonic ideal of an inclusion based on diversity rather than on a universal set of principles of Eurocentric origin. However, the openness of the WSF is not all encompassing and it is subject to a rather large set of limitations both formally codified by the Charter or informally applied by organizers and

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<sup>182</sup> See S. Sullivan, 2005.

<sup>183</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present work, but it would be interesting to consider the intellectual trajectory of the concept of “openness” from Popper (1945) to Arendt (1958) and later Habermas (1962).

participants or systemic. To explore in detail the critical issues related to the “openness” of the WSF I will start by asking the following question: what are the selective processes that determine inclusion and exclusion in the WSF? Inclusion and exclusion in the WSF are determined by formal regulation and informal norms, political dynamics and social structures (Yla-Anttila, 2005).

### **2.1.1 The Rules of the Open Space**

The formal codification by the WSF Charter imposes the following limitations:

- Political parties are not allowed in the WSF space: party members are allowed as observers.
- Organisations or movements that choose violence as their form of struggle are not allowed to take part in the WSF.
- Members of governments or international organisation can take part in the WSF in their personal capacity.

To these regulations, formal codifications and the rule of law of the place where the WSF event is taking place apply which also add to the border of the WSF space, limit its claims to autonomy and freedom: the WSF is clearly not the same space if it is organised in Karachi (a dictatorship), in India (when the ruling party is right wing) or in Venezuela (a socialist country): freedom of movement, organisation and speech, and their respective enforcement, vary considerably. For instance, the support given in Brazil by the governing Workers' Party sped up all

bureaucratic practices, whereas in India and Pakistan people found extremely hard to negotiate their access to the country where the forums were organised due to resistance from government officials and bureaucrats in charge of releasing visas. Another remarkable case was of course the legislation in India about receiving foreign funds for local organisations. The whole bureaucratic process was lengthy and before the WSF India Trust managed to set up an account that could receive foreign funds it had to borrow two other organisation's accounts with all the related complexities involved of complex accounting and alleged opaque accountability.

### **2.1.2 Informal Norms and the Open Space**

The informal norms that intervene in creating barriers of exclusion or privileged channels of inclusion are also of two types:

- Relative to norms and values built by the WSF process during its history
- Relative to norms and values of the place where the WSF takes place

The WSF has created a set of norms and values based on the Charter and on the codes of cultural and political practice that inspired it: these norms and values have taken a life of their own and they are interpreted autonomously and instrumentally by those who belong to the decision-making structures of the WSF. The set of varying policy prescriptions and organisational activities deriving from the interpretation and the performance of that set of norms and values create an

important symbolic framework which hide practices of inclusion and exclusion (as in the case of the Dalits as discussed above and more in detail in chapter 5).

### **2.1.3 Power in the Open Space**

Reasons of political strategy and imbalances of power generate important consequences in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of the WSF. The Mumbai office witnessed strategic alliances and coalitions struggling for the allocation of strategic resources and for the control of departments of the organisational structures deemed to have strategic relevance. Power in WSF2004 was played at several levels. Strategic negotiations took place at the level of the conferences: during the design phase and their delivery; in scheduling the seminars and their allocation to the rooms principles of centrality and periphery applied. The most important negotiations, the more genuinely political, took place in informal meetings. In those meetings spaces of influence were distributed, negotiated and struggled for, beyond the reach of the accountability structure of WSF2004, as detailed in the letter reported above by the Dalit leader denouncing secrecy and conspiracy by the WSF leadership in Delhi and Mumbai. There are also other levels in which power and influence played a crucial role in a somewhat indirect way. See for instance the following incident in which an IOC member considers of extreme political relevance the allocation of solidarity tent spaces, contradicting fully the dictates of the Charter:

I just received another inquiry for a tent from La Via Campesina. (...), I don't think we can leave allocation of the tents to the Venue group. Who gets the tents and for how long will reflect the profile of the WSF to some degree, especially since most tent spaces are requested by movements. I (...) think [PG] will have to do some work on allocating tents<sup>184</sup>.

According to the Charter, the WSF “does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings”<sup>185</sup>. I argue that the subversion of the dynamics of domination in society and in the WSF, must happen both through appropriate institutional adjustments of the organisational structure (through conflict and struggle as shown above), and through a thorough work of education to equality and to social justice that interests the whole WSF (in line with its radical pedagogical inspiration). Moreover, power and its very close relative, conflict, represent the main sources of creative energy (Foucault, 1980, 1984 and 1995; Lukes, 2005; Wright, 2005) not only within the WSF but in the wider society as well. In this sense, power reformulates itself while activists break it and struggle against it, and this struggle constitute one of the springs of social change.

According to Whitaker, not only the WSF is not a place for power but one where power is ridiculed by the participants (2004) along with those performing surpassed political practices. He believes that power “instead of uniting, divide and distance, and so weaken all those involved” (2005b). This understanding does not represent the understanding and aspirations of the organisers of the forums so far. If the WSF aspires at providing an alternative to neoliberalism and if the weapons of neoliberalism are naturalisation and de-politicisation, it is therefore a

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<sup>184</sup> IOC list, December 2003.

<sup>185</sup> Chapter 6.

weak strategy denying the fundamental role of politics in social change. This approach to power in the open space undermines considerably the WSF's effectiveness.

The position held by Whitaker and others in the WSF has been contested by participants and critics of the WSF. Santos (2005), believes that to those dynamics of power taking place in the WSF the organisers need to apply as consistent criteria of transparency and democracy as are expected for power dynamics in the wider society: power needs to be exposed, controlled, guided, used creatively. For Waterman (2003c) the WSF is not a neutral space, therefore, is not yet something different from "old politics" but acting fully within the same cultural (political) framework. Albert's criticism (2003), exposes some of the innumerable places where power dynamics play a crucial role: decisions on whom to invite to the plenary conferences; on the exclusion of groups like the Zapatistas, political parties or armed resistance groups; on the marginalisation of other groups considered too radical, like the Italian Disubbidienti or PGA, and all decisions on the programme are highly political. Moreover, the efforts to ensure gender, race, geographic and class balance are political.

In light of the above considerations, power seems to have only a negative dimension for those critics<sup>186</sup>. A more sophisticated understanding of power and its relevance within the WSF would not fail to address the inevitable exclusive dynamics constituting the main shortcomings of the WSF. Special care has to be

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<sup>186</sup> But Latour considers power an empty concept (1986:266) because it can be used to describe outcome of actions but cannot explain them.

put in exposing and reformulating power dynamics and patterns of domination on a daily basis to create inclusive domains of exchange among activists within the WSF. I claim here with Lukes (2005) that power is at its highest when is least evident and exposed: the denial of the existence of power dynamics impeded the full explorations of the powerful potentialities of resistance that power allows (and is constituted by) according to the popular formulation by Foucault (see also Heywood, 1997). Foucault's argument, about agentless power (Kurtz, 2001)<sup>187</sup>, all pervasive and looming on people's desire of emancipation and inevitably frustrating them, inspired Bourdieu's powerful explorations<sup>188</sup> of the ways in which domination becomes embodied and plays beyond the control of the agent becoming systemic, fully embodied and transmitted as if along with the genetic pool<sup>189</sup>. In such circumstances it is absolutely crucial that proactive research and exposure of power dynamics become central practice in the WSF as they determine the condition through which the WSF can offer a viable and legitimate claim to redress the social imbalances aggravated by neoliberalism. In other words, if neoliberalism as stated above and earlier in this thesis is centred on de-politicising strategies, the WSF has to make of politicisation of daily practices its central political strategy.

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<sup>187</sup> For Appadurai "Power is largely a matter of the imprinting of large-scale disciplines of civility, dignity and bodily control onto the intimate level of embodied agents" (1996:148)

<sup>188</sup> A consequence of Foucault's and Bourdieu's elaborations directly relevant for the WSF case is discussed by Roseberry (1994) in his analysis of the effects of domination in the formulation of the language of resistance, see also Gledhill (1994).

<sup>189</sup> The principle formulated by Bourdieu according to which the anthropocentric vision of the world built by male power and inscribed directly on the bodies of both male and females individuals, is at the root of the sexual division of labour, at the root of the organisation of the social space. Domination is performed by rituals through which the learning process takes place and its directly inscribed on the body. This system makes of qualities like "the female's intuition" a product of the male domination, and direct outcome of the construction of the woman as inferior and unable to fully master rational knowledge: what's left to her is putting her attention to symbols carrying meanings of inferior quality like the tone of the voice and not the content, emotions more than rational articulations of thoughts (Bourdieu, 1998).

#### 2.1.4 Social Structures and Open Space

One more set of constraints to the open space, as defined by Whitaker and the other initiators of the WSF, is determined by the local social structures. The interplay between agency and social structures, in the context of his analysis of power dynamics (as detailed above), is well exposed by Lukes (2005): “when can social causation be characterised as an exercise of power, or, more precisely, how and where is the line to be drawn between structural determination, on the one hand, and an exercise of power, on the other?” (2005:54). His answer, describes society as “an interplay of power and structure, a web of possibilities for agents, whose nature is both active and structured, to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits, which in consequence expand and contract over time” (68-9)<sup>190</sup>. The particular structural conditions, specific of the Indian context, that generated forms of hideous exclusion in WSF2004 were several and caused often reported cases of systemic exclusion of marginalised social groups. In particular women, Adivasis, Dalits, youth and Muslims found difficult if not outright impossible to join the WSF in India. With this respect, I was partially involved in the clash between three IOC members and a Muslim activist who repeatedly and legitimately accused the IOC of reproducing systemic exclusion performed for decades by the wider Indian society (Caruso, 2005). Repeated cases of systemic exclusion were reproduced in WSF2004 also with respect to the constant marginalisation of women in the office or in the decision-making structures of the

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<sup>190</sup> See on this the work by Giddens on the theory of structuration (1979 and 1984).



forum as often reported both publicly or in their interviews with me. Young activists were asked to choose an adult IOC member as guide of their process. Dalits were not represented in the organisational process of the Youth Camp until some fought their way in (with positive outcome for the whole organisational process); no Adivasi was involved in the WSF in India, and the list could continue.

### **3 Criticism of the Open Space 2: on “Space”**

The arguments discussed so far expose the analytical weaknesses of the “open space” concept. Along similar lines, Gilbert argues against the total openness of any space and the contradiction in terms of the expression “open space” (Gilbert, 2005:237; see also Yla-Anttila, 2005). Following Foucault, he highlights the creative dimension of boundaries and their giving shape to shapeless matter. On the other side, borders constitute the primitive necessity for communication as an attempt to negotiate two identities (the Subject and the Other)<sup>191</sup>. The “open” space then becomes a bounded space that interacts, communicates, conflicts, and recursively constitutive and is constituted by its interactions with neoliberalism. The social, political and cultural importance of the WSF resides in its being a place where borders are put in the foreground and activists are invited to cross those borders in a collective, continuously conflictual, desecrater ritual<sup>192</sup>. In this paragraph I discuss some theories of space and I show how a more sophisticated

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<sup>191</sup> Barth, 1969; Maturana and Varela, 1992.

<sup>192</sup> See Ribeiro, 2004 on boundaries and translation, see also his use of Hall and Bakhtin.

understanding of the relationship between space and borders (social, cultural etc.) is necessary to fully understand nature and potentialities of the WFS as infrastructure of a global counter-hegemonic bloc against neoliberalism.

The definition of the WSF as “open space” risks to create the false illusion of a place where “natural laws” rather than social and political dynamics determine social change. These laws would be of the same kind as the law of gravity: perfect, just and equal because they apply to every substance in the same way. There are no such “spaces” in the social sphere of human interactions. Neoliberal thinkers though (see for instance Fukuyama) would allow that indeed there can be an absolute space regulated by “natural laws” that apply to all the actors involved in that space in the same way: that space they call the market (Barber, 2002). To avoid the fundamental similarity between the open “space” and the market (see beyond the discussion on the space/place terminology), there is the need in the WSF, to question the monopoly of homogeneous spaces as well understood by one of the founders of the WSF, Candido Grybowski. He stated that: “To try to eliminate the contradictions at the core of the WSF and turn it into a more homogeneous space and process for confronting neoliberalism is the aim of certain forces, inspired on the classical political partisanship of the left. I would say that this struggle is legitimate and deserves respect... but it destroys innovation of the WSF” (quoted in Simonson 2004:42). The perceived complexity exposes the risks of dealing with differences, within the WSF, as neoliberalism does: for neoliberalism, differences are just flavours of the same product (the

Kantian universal humanity) which make units out of individuals, clients out of citizens, numbers out of neighbours.

The intricacies of the spatial determination of the “open space” have been exposed by many from different perspectives: the WSF as a “space” of flux and encounter has been opposed to the “place” of traditional politics where directions, goals and strategies are determined by closed leaderships (see later in this chapter for a discussion on surpassing the “open space”/leadership opposition). In other words, the tension referred above by De Angelis, between horizontals and verticals, has been translated into that between the WSF as a place of “old” politics (monolithic, modern and directed by an authoritarian leadership) and the space of “new” politics (fluid, post-modern and fully networked)<sup>193</sup>. I suggest here, that this radical opposition is analytically weak and conceals more than it reveals. The opposition between place and space in the debate on the nature of the WSF resonates with other dualistic oppositions, legacy of the same structural thought (Fardon, 1995) which the WSF wants to leave behind and which inspired the “old” politics that the WSF is trying to surpass. The limitations of the space/place opposition bare an uncomfortable family resemblance with the ‘them’ versus ‘us’ (identity/otherness) discourse (Wright, 2005:74). In WSF2004 these debates translated into the opposition between “old” CPIs and “new” NGOs or “old” CPIs and NGOs and “new” identity and single issue movements (such as the NAPM). I argue that the processes of negotiation of real or symbolic boundaries within the WSF drive a complex recursive interaction between marginalised and dominant

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<sup>193</sup> Santos, 2005; Castells 1996; Burawoy, 2000, Harvey, 1985.

social groups within the same WSF space. It is counter-productive, politically weak and tactically misleading assuming that the WSF space is immune from the social dynamics that apply everywhere else and that no conflicts, no power, no authoritarian leadership can take shape in this privileged, “out of the world” space. Moreover, the above mentioned opposition between place (old politics, parties and trade unions) and space – open – of new political culture (the WSF) is essentialist. The essentialist approach (Escobar, 2001) to place and culture and to their relation has been challenged by authors like Gupta and Ferguson (1997). They demonstrate that places are challenged by continuous border crossing performed by migrant workers, nomads, travellers, tourists, and members of transnational business and professional elite. Moving beyond an understanding of places as separated allows seeing them as hierarchically interconnected depending on power dynamics between them<sup>194</sup>.

On the basis of this consideration on space, place and borders, I suggest her that the potentialities of the WSF are better understood by thoroughly investigating the border dynamics within it and their relation with the hegemonic practices discussed above and later (chapter 5) in reference to WSF2004. The uncritical stress, instead, on the alleged openness of the political and organisational space of the WSF, obscures rather than unveils the WSF political, social and cultural potentialities. The borders discussed here are often removed from their physical instantiation, away from the area of contact between two places (Anderson, 1991; Appadurai, 1996). Lamont and Molnar (2002) distinguish between social and

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<sup>194</sup> Ferguson and Gupta use extensively Bhabha’s work according to which the borderland is the place where contradictions, antagonisms, hybridities, cultural influences, negotiate themselves (O Riain, 2000).

symbolic boundaries. Their work is very pertinent to the study of the WSF. In their words:

Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (...). They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources. (...) Social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities. They are also revealed in stable behavioural patterns of association, as manifested in connubiality and commensality" (168).

Later the authors explain the relation between symbolic and social boundaries. The following comment is particularly relevant for the WSF context:

In some case symbolic boundaries may become so salient that they take the place of social boundaries. (...) imagined symbolic communities, maintained by new information technologies, are also organized exclusively by symbolic boundaries as opposed to social network based communities" (184).

In WSF2004 social and symbolic boundaries divided the "open space" in fluid areas of influence in the following way. Identity solidarities were built between women, but political solidarities divided women according to their belonging to either the area of the communist parties, the NGOs or the social movements gathering in the NAPM. Similar multiple cross-border identities concerned Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, etc. On the basis of these observations, it is my contention here that the exploration of those boundaries, the multiple identities and interests that they design on the WSF map and their political and organisational

implications have been suspended in the WSF. The reasons for this were tactical, aiming at privileging commonalities and denying conflicting interests and identities in order to foster the formation of a critical mass of organisations, social movements, and individuals. The outcome of this decision risks to make the WSF lose its legitimacy as a site for the elaboration of a new political culture. If its main goal is to build a world based on differences and their respect, it will have to deal more pro-actively with the conditions and political and social implications of those differences.

What so far discussed relates directly to WSF2004 in the following manner: the borders between the WSF space and the outside world challenge the absolute openness stated by many organisers and critics (as reported above). Formal and informal rules determine exclusion as shown in the previous section and power dynamics generate conflicts and power struggles for the access and appropriation of limited resources (big conference halls were at the centre of the conflict reported above between the PG and the Dalit leader). Moreover, social structures create marginalisation as, again, seen above in the same case but also in chapter 3 in the reported case involving the Muslim activist (see later chapter 5 for a thorough discussion on the marginalisation of vulnerable groups in India). These conditions of inclusion and exclusion (social, political and cultural) must not be obliterated. The borders they create and the conflicts they generate constitute the grounds on which the WSF builds its epistemological and political struggles against neoliberalism. Denying the import of the conditions of existence of the epistemological struggle reduces its efficacy, misleads those joining in the WSF

space and, in the long run, risks to make the WSF space explode due to conflicts whose existence and causes it is denying.

The WSF as a space of boundaries as described above, is the perfect context where new spaces can be created and new alternatives can be elaborated. A non-essentialist approach to the place/space debate exposes how the old politics/new politics debate has no ontological grounds and it is informed by disingenuous tactical choices and strong normative aspirations. The uncritical focus on those aspirations not only remove analytical and political attention from the reality of the systemic relations of power and domination that take place within the WSF, but, in fact, reproduce those systems of oppression that the WSF should help eliminate (Biccum, 2005).

Whitaker's conception of the WSF as a space like the Latin-American square recalls the important work by Low (1995, 1996). According to her spaces are socially constructed and this construction includes social, economic, ideological and technological factors (1996). In her work, the social construction of space depends on "symbolic experience of spaces as mediated by social processes as exchange, conflict and control" (1996:861). In an earlier paper she wrote "Physical space is ordered by and reflects the power structures to which the community is subordinated" (1995:748). Once more, the legitimacy of the "open space" definition as a horizontal, fully open and non-political space is strongly challenged. If the objects that populate a given space do define it, is therefore the case that there would be different WSF/spaces and any of them defined by the

relations between the objects that move in them. The spaces that are the forums are spaces determined by the relationships between the actors that move in them and those relationships are determined by structural positioning of those actors and power imbalances. In this case the importance of analysing in depth the history, political dynamics and social structures of the host country of the WSF annual event to fully grasp the constitutive nature of WSF2004 becomes clear.

The nature of the WSF has to be subject to further theoretical scrutiny. Following Harvey, I suggest here that spaces are socially constructed (Harvey, 1996; Bryant, 2001). Strongly procedural and dialectical, Harvey's approach invites us to consider values (like justice and equality) and foundational concepts, like place and space, as processual rather than essential, where values are outcome of iterative "processes of evaluation" (Harvey, 1996:11) and spaces outcome of similar social processes based not only on money but also on family, gender, nation, ethnic identity, humanism, ideals of morality and justice, etc. Spaces and places are constitutive and constituted by social relation and practices (207). In the WSF, the practices that define its boundaries are, I suggest in this thesis, multiple hegemonic practices. In WSF2004 the WSF space was defined by the struggles for leadership between CPIs and NGOs.

Its analytical weaknesses notwithstanding the open space has nonetheless proved a powerful mobilising tool, allowing for the formation of the biggest concentration of organisations and social movements at the global level ever recorded. However, due to the limitations exposed above, I suggest that the open



space can in fact be misleading of its nature and can alienate the sophisticated activists who found uncomfortable to negotiate the ambiguous nature of the WSF. I suggest that a sophisticated approach to leadership in the WSF, along with an analytically robust understanding of its nature, can provide us with a more accurate idea of not only what the WSF is, but how it acts and what are the political potentialities of this ambitious world movement.

Issues of leadership need to be looked at with more care than it has been done so far with respect to the WSF. I suggest as a preliminary thesis that the WSF2004 and more in general the WSF allows at this stage for a networked leadership on the basis of formal and informal agreements between the leaders of the WSF in which sectors and organisations take on board the aspects of the organisational political process they are more familiar with.

#### **4. Leadership**

In the previous part of the chapter I discussed the limitations of the conflation of the two contrasting meanings of the open space as a critical tool and as an instrument to build the counter-hegemonic front against neoliberalism. In this section I discuss the relation between hegemony and leadership in the WSF. Leadership and open space are set in opposition to each other in the WSF in a way that recalls the horizontal/vertical opposition or the old/new politics. As in the previous cases I show here that a dualist position does not fully account for the

complexities expressed in the WSF. I conclude that a sophisticated approach to leadership in the WSF helps understand and overcome the limitations of the open space discourse and to appreciate nature and direction of the counter-hegemonic project initiated by the WSF. I suggest, in a preliminary way, that if the epistemological struggle is the most promising tool that the WSF has elaborated in order to fulfil its long-term vision, a sophisticated, non-authoritarian and, most of all, ad hoc leadership would constitute the crucial strategic instrument needed by the WSF to fulfil its mission to create a global alliance against neoliberalism.

Whitaker (2004) insists that the WSF is a space with no leaders and that the organisational structure is made of facilitators whose sole task is to prepare the space where the participants will meet, and share their struggles and goals. For Toussaint<sup>195</sup>, one of the major strengths of the WSF is the lack of a formal leadership. However, as I show throughout this work a consistent structure for the WSF is slowly taking shape. In WSF2004, critics of the “open space” as a space of unaccountability, exposed the authoritarian behaviour of the informal leadership of the organisational process (Sen, 2004c). From the other side, it has been argued that an absolute lack of formal leadership leads to paralysis of the process and to pernicious and uncontrollable forms of informal power (Freeman, 1970; Epstein, 2001; Mertes, 2003).

In Latin America, activists and intellectuals linked with traditional party forces advocate for a global leadership of the kind offered by presidents Lula and

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<sup>195</sup> Interviewed by Ferrari (2003).

Chavez<sup>196</sup>. Within the WSF they advocate for a more consistent role of the leadership and of the IC one that avoids not only ineffective actions but also the subtle process of bureaucratisation of the WSF structure<sup>197</sup>. Supporting the claims of those activists, analysts of political strategy such as Epstein (2001) and Freeman (1970) expose the strategic naivety of those who claim that movements with no formal leadership are democratic. Epstein writes that:

The moral absolutism of the anarchist approach to politics is difficult to sustain in the context of a social movement. Absolute internal equality is hard to sustain. Movements need leaders. Anti-leadership ideology cannot eliminate leaders, but it can lead a movement to deny that it has leaders, thus undermining democratic constraints on those who assume the roles of leadership, and also preventing the formation of vehicles for recruiting new leaders when the existing ones become too tired to continue. Within radical feminism a view of all hierarchies as oppressive led to attacks on those who took on the responsibilities of leadership. This led to considerable internal conflict, and created a reluctance to take on leadership roles, which weakened the movement. Movements dominated by an anarchist mindset are prone to burning out early (2001:8-9).

Many commentators have observed that a clear leadership is in charge of the WSF. Their crucial role, in direct opposition with the aspirations of many to elaborate new forms of political organisation on a global scale, is exposed by Glasius and Timms (2006) who highlight that the leadership of the forums is not only present and taking decisions of crucial political importance, but it is also “shadowy” due to the almost complete lack of transparency on the mechanisms by

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<sup>196</sup> Sarti (2003) claims that the masses gathered to welcome Lula and Chavez at the WSF2003 were a clear indication of their desire for a radical change and a clear leadership. For Vera-Zavala (2003) instead: “The presence of Lula was indication of the attempt of the old left (...) to suffocate the movement, to suffocate the multitude”.

<sup>197</sup> This debate has taken place several time in the IC mailing list in the past three years.

which decision are taken and by whom. Moreover, the space vacated by many WSF activists reacting to forms of authoritarian leadership is inevitably filled by veteran professional political leaders (see Albert, 2003). In WSF India, leadership was understood from very early in the process in an ambiguous and contested manner. In the minutes of a meeting of the Culture Group of ASF2003 held at the end of 2002, for instance, was reported that:

The four sessions would be guided by a 'Facilitator' and not 'presided' over, as originally decided. We have tried to choose experienced and 'strong' facilitators as they would need to control and guide that session. (...) Owing to shortage of time, it was decided that no concluding speech would be given by facilitators. But that the whole Conference would be summed up at the end by [a member of the CPI-ML].

These ambiguous interpretations of the forum's horizontality created strong conflicts and splits. Some members of the IOC have been accused of vanguardism, of hijacking the forum (see above and later in chapter 5) and others have been forced out of the process for not being able to counter those practices (Sen, 2004c). The complex approaches to leadership in India do not only belong to the traditional left. It needs noting, in fact, that Gandhi, the great anarchist, was also Gandhi the great leader, the Mahatma. These approaches to leadership and the aim of making the organisations contributing to the WSF India process converge in a national alliance against neoliberalism, casteism and communalism generated ambiguities and conflicts between actors struggling for leadership and between them and those aspiring to an acephalous WSF. In the following pages I review some of the features of the debate over leadership in social movements and

I make some suggestions on a rather more sophisticated approach to the rather polarised debate on leadership in the WSF.

#### **4. 1 What are leaders?**

Baker, Johnson and Lavalette (2001) denounce the consistent lack of attention to leadership in social movements. They conclude that there has been a consistent desire from part of scholars to avoid “grand men” theories of history and collective action or “agitator” scenarios according to which there would be no mobilisation or strikes if it weren’t for those trouble-makers who cause them, in order to avoid reading the membership’s role as that of mindless sheep. However, they suggest, leaders are crucial to initiate actions as advised by Gramsci (1971:196) according to whom no actions would take place without the inspirations of individuals who take the lead. Gramsci distinguishes from the forms of leadership in the political society (the army, the legal system, the government) which is coercive and based on domination, from the leadership in civil society based on consent. One further reason is identified by Baker, Johnson and Lavalette (2001): due to the role played in academia by scholar activists, leadership has been often identified with specific practices of control of the decision-making process by few. They describe the state of the literature on leadership as follows:

If the “collective behaviour” tradition stressed the lack of rationality in the actions of the masses

and paid no attention to the motivations of leaders and the relevance of their actions, the “resource mobilisation” and “political process” traditions although restoring the rationality of people’s movements did not still fully explain the relevance of the role of leaders due to a more structural approach to change and a reduced attention to individual agency. The same limited understanding of the importance of leadership was shared by the NSM school that focused more on the relations between movement and surrounding contexts (Baker, Johnson and Lavalette, 2001).

From the mid 90s the works on leadership start focusing rather more on the role of these key characters in social movements. For Melucci (1996) leaders determine the boundaries of the shared identity of the individuals of the movement; moreover, leaders design strategies and tactics. On this second aspect, Eyerman and Jamison (1991) discuss extensively what they distinguish as 'cosmological', 'technical' and 'organisational' problems and tasks of leaders. From their point of view leaders play fundamental roles in framing the boundaries of the theoretical visions of the movement; they help develop a theory of the social and of its malaise (cosmological role) and consequently help define the appropriate actions (technical role) to overcome the problems that the group is facing and to set up the organisational structure to perform those actions (organisational role).

The most crucial skill of a leader is communication. Stressing the fundamental relational role of leaders, the focus on communication exposes how leaders work. However, their actions are not limited to rhetoric and manipulation: to be influential leaders need to speak a language that resonates with that of the followers and their way of framing the social issues and the appropriate strategy to overcome them has to speak the language of the collective identity that the

interactions within the movement is building, using categories and symbolic idioms that can be fully understood and shared by the group members (Rangan, 2000). This role in particular has been of crucial relevance in order to convince large sections of the Indian Civil society to join the WSF endeavour (in particular with reference to NAPM).

Although often movements challenge the social structures that exclude many from accessing scarce resources, movements' leaders tend to be among those with better exclusive access to resources, knowledge and "human capital" (Bourdieu, 1990). These issues of power imbalance between leaders and their constituencies have been highlighted often in WSF2004 (see Chapter 6, for a discussion of the systemic exclusion from the leadership of the WSF India of socially marginalised groups). This created a formidable tension between the need for purposive and confident leadership and the inevitability of the exclusiveness of the process through which leadership is formed. Precisely because personal qualities are not sufficient to determine a leader, the role of social structures in building those qualities and allow access to the necessary resources to educate and train a leader, become crucial. A critique of those social structures (at the centre of WSF activism) inevitably challenges, according to some, the very legitimacy of leaders. The importance of this debate for the WSF present and future endeavours is considerable. Although the debate within the WSF India presents the contradictions between two apparently incommensurable positions, the actual observation shows a wider set of styles, from a more participatory kind to a more consent based to a managerial one or an "old" authoritarian one. The positions

between those who claim no role for leaders and those who dread a leaderless movement although they often appear to be incommensurable are, in practice, in close coexistence and collaboration (albeit often conflicting).

Leaders' position at the interface between the local reality and the global network (Alvarez, 1997), or between the movements and funders, and also between the movement and the state (Rangan, 2000), and, even more, their constant contact with the media, generates mechanism of legitimisation coming from outside the movement over which movement's members have no control. The risk of cultural imperialism (accusation often directed towards those leaders whose position is sustained by their ability to mobilise foreign funding, key issue in the Indian context) and neo-colonialism make of this debate an extremely sensitive one. Leaders are also crucial in conflict situations as in the case discussed earlier of the conflict between the Muslim activist and the IOC. The mediating role of a recognised leader of WSF India avoided an escalation of the conflict. Social movements without formal leadership would disintegrate due to the inevitable conflicts and crises generated by the "shadowy" practices of informal leadership. Therefore, leadership must be constant in a movement, always keeping it united, gathering and intelligently using power (Adair, 1990), creating followers (Wheatley, 1994), motivating them (Kouzes and Posner, 1995) by setting personal examples (Drucker, 1990; Fowler, 2000), and directing them in order to make their action more coordinated and therefore effective (Grint, 1997), articulating the "vocabulary of the protest" (Guha cited in Fox and Starn, 1997) and projecting a vision (Fiedler, 1967). If leadership has a crucial role in social movements and



in social change processes, it is necessary to establish what kind of leadership is most suitable for the WSF. Moreover, I ask how and if the WSF is able to elaborate alternative forms of leadership that expose and solve the polarisation of views between traditional left and NGO activists and their “horizontal” counterparts.

The problems raised by an insufficient elaboration of the WSF leadership have created bitter debates in WSF2004. A further radical position against political leadership was articulated in WSF2004. In moments of crisis several actors called for a more business-like way of running the forum. The shift toward a managerial leadership (task-oriented, pragmatic and contingent), observed in the debate in WSF2004, is a way to oppose hierarchies and propose new organizational structures. But this attitude hides a clear de-politicising attempt towards the crucially political tasks of allocating resources in the WSF process through the insufficient distinction between leaders and organising committee. This limitation is not unique of the Indian context, but it is shared by the whole WSF. The naïve, but also often disingenuous, denial of leadership role to the “facilitators” of the open space (otherwise called “organisers” of the events) has been reported widely in the literature (see for instance Glasius and Timms, 2006). What I wish to highlight here is an important contradiction generated by the inaccurate analysis of leadership issues in the WSF. The lack of sophisticated understanding of nature, potentialities and limitations of political leadership in social movements has vacated a crucial space readily filled either by authoritarian leaders or by managerial and de-politicising approaches to leadership in line with neoliberal

values (Bourdieu, 2001). The clashes between horizontal approaches to leadership (Hardt and Negri, 2000) and more authoritarian ones as those advocated by certain traditional left, looked inappropriate and even irrelevant in India when the date of the event approached. Things needed to be done: fast, as above reported. The obvious solution seems to be managers, people who do things (Hudson, 1995; Hailey and Smillie, 2001). The managerial approach and the knowledge-based approach advocated with great energy by NGO members generated more than a resented comment by those who expected the WSF to practice the alternatives that they claimed they were struggling for.

#### **4.2 A better leadership is possible**

Scholarly debate over leadership within and around the WSF has produced interesting positions aiming at formulating a new approach to leadership and organisational culture. A crucial debate over structure of political movements and leadership has taken the lead from Freeman's seminal work on the "tyranny of structurelessness" (1970) according to whom, the statement of leaderlessness (as in the Charter of the WSF) and the denial of the inevitable leadership roles within social movements generate lack of accountability and transparency and finally a total lack of democracy, hence a tyranny. In this environment, informal power dynamic take shape over which the group has no control and often no knowledge. She then suggests that a more sophisticated approach to leadership is needed in social movements rather than a simplistic association of leadership with authoritarianism and lack of formal leadership with libertarianism and

horizontality. Vera-Zavala (2003) recalls that fundamental debate discussing the new terminology *en vogue* in the WSF:

The difference between coordinating and becoming an avant-garde is thin. We do need coordination, and we do need good leaders (...). Dogmatic activists being fanatic over processes, rejecting decisions not taken by consensus and that immediately criticise every event that is not self-sustained can be equally tiresome for the social forum process.

For Santos (2005) it is fundamental that leaders learn to walk at the pace of those who are slower, an interpretation of the Zapatista motto "*mandar obedeciendo*" (command by obeying). I argue that it is necessary to expose all kinds of formal and informal, overt or covert, authoritarian, managerial, participatory, leadership in the WSF process. Only by doing that it would be possible to deal with it in an open and constructive way. Leaders in the WSF are often hidden behind the role of coordinators, facilitators and tasks managers. The opacity of the leadership described above, exposes a further problem discussed in the debate over leadership: movements often rely on dozens of unsung leaders performing strategic activities. The role of those leaders seems to be comparatively great within the WSF and it exposes a delicate question on the transparency of the decision-making and framing processes and the role of individuals in those processes. The formal leadership of the WSF India is partly reflected by the membership of the IOC, although their leadership role is, as stated above, hidden behind their role as "organisers". In that committee all sectors of the Indian civil society are represented. The interplay and conflicts among those leaders are discussed in more detail the following chapter in relation to the specific Indian

political and social structures.

The stiff criticism that “traditional” (i.e. vanguardist) leadership has generated in the WSF refers mostly to the authoritarian qualities that seem to be inevitably linked to the role of leaders. However, Purkis (2001), following Bakunin, suggests that leaders do not need to be authoritarian rather they need to show authoritative positions to inspire the followers. Even more subtle and promising is the work of Bakhtin who suggest distinguishing between “authoritative” speech and “internally persuasive” words. If authoritative words (based on religion, science, parental role etc.) impose domination (*Herrschaft*, in the Weberian sense) and demand obedience, persuasion seems to allow for a further degree of interaction between the actors involved in the negotiation about how to direct the political action of the movement. Those reported above are only some of the possible paths to follow to appreciate the complexities of leadership in social movements. Engaging with those issues could produce new models of ad-hoc leadership, task oriented and contingent, fully networked and articulated by bringing together in creative and always new ways tasks and skills with a genuine political approach and an enhanced social sensibility. Fully in line with the WSF as a pedagogical space where activists learn and share ideas for a new world, those new leaders should be inspired and driven political activists, learners, teachers and communicators (Senge, 1990; Fowler, 1997; Gramsci, 1971; Freire, 1970, 1992 and 1998)<sup>198</sup>.

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<sup>198</sup> For a discussion on the radical pedagogy of the WSF see chapter 3.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the foundations of the core discursive tool elaborated by the WSF, the “open space”. I argued that the “open space” is built on weak analytical foundations and although extremely successful as a mobilising tool, it needs to be complemented by proactive political actions to ensure that power dynamics and social inequalities do not create marginalisation within its boundaries. The degree of consciousness about deliberate or unconscious power dynamics and patterns of domination is very varied within a gigantic movement like the WSF. Regulation of the interaction of the different social actors within the WSF through transparent guidelines can be (along with a more analytically robust understanding of political and social dynamics) a way to allow for a shared understanding around issues of inclusion and exclusion. The WSF can be an inspiring inclusive space, but it is not inherently so. It is rather a contingent inclusive space, predicated on the implementation of a more sophisticated leadership along the lines proposed above. It has to be made open and kept open through proactive actions with important political implications to actively fight against power dynamics and patterns of domination present in the WSF. Failing in learning these important lessons can reduce the scope of the WSF outreach and, eventually, make it collapse. The open space has been thought by the initiators of the WSF as the space in which the epistemological struggle against neoliberalism is fought through self-education and the WSF radical pedagogy (see chapter 3). I suggested here instead that the open space has been used, in particular in India, as a strategic tool to convene a national convergence of CSO&Ms. This strategy had

at heart a purely hegemonic strategy, although, as discussed in the following chapter “hegemony” has been denied consistently by the organisers of WSF2004. The outcome of this is doubly self-defeating. By denying hegemony and leadership the WSF cannot fulfil its mission of convening a global political bloc against neoliberalism. Moreover, by not recognising patterns of domination and social and political inequalities, the WSF cannot fulfil its vision to make the world radically better than the current neoliberal one.

## Chapter 5: The WSF in India

We are having experience of Fronts and Federations since last 55 years. Many of us are part of it. We are all being beaten up by capital dominated forces on one hand and communal and fascist forces on the other. We are all loaded with personal and organisational egos, is it not? Many many movements and campaigns in our country are working on different viewpoints or ideologies such as Marxists, Socialists, Gandhians, Ambedkarites and many others<sup>199</sup>.

As previously seen (see chapter 3), the mission of WSF India was to constitute a political front at a national level against neoliberalism, casteism and communalism. With this ambition the organisers of ASF2003 (see Chapter 2) initiated the process for WSF2004. The quote reported above by an authoritative peasant leader highlights the three fundamental features and of ICS and illustrates their implications for the success of WSF India. He highlights first that ICS has experienced all sorts of fronts, alliances and coalitions since independence. He implies that none has succeeded in creating a strong actor that could resist the assaults of capitalism, fascism and communalism. He also recognises that one of the main reasons why alliances and coalitions have failed so far has to be credited to poor leadership (blinded by their ego). This is not the only problem: ICS is traversed by different ideologies, some of which, Marxism, Gandhism, Ambedkarism, Socialism, seem not to be commensurable although historically they have worked in contingent coalitions. In order to make sure that the WSF India does not start with a major liability, he suggested including all of them in the

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<sup>199</sup> ASF list, February, 2003.

organisational process. This analysis and his suggested solution were shared by the majority of those involved in the WSF India and gave rise to the underlying principles that built its organisational architecture: balanced and inclusive sectoral and ideological representation. The need to accommodate the ideological, political, and social variety expressed by the Indian sub-continent, created the conditions for the elaboration of the complex (albeit at times Byzantine as in Sen, 2004) structure of WSF2004. The interesting experiments in organisational structure notwithstanding, fractures consolidated during decades could not be negotiated adequately, and often reproduced themselves, within the WSF organisational space, giving origin to harsh conflicts over the leadership of the process and over the allocation of the scarce resources which endowed WSF2004.

This chapter discusses the instantiation within the WSF2004 framework of conflicts and hegemonic practices characteristic of the wider ICS. Its structure is the following: in the first section I discuss the structure of WSF India. Following, I illustrate the intra- and inter- sectoral conflicts generated by the clash over the leaderships of WSF2004. In the third section I discuss the features of the hegemony performed by some actors in WSF2004. This chapter illustrates the arguments articulated in the previous chapters: it is my contention that the WSF India failed to elaborate, on one side, sophisticated forms of flexible hegemony (see chapter 3) which do not repress cultural and social specificities, and, on the other, forms of leadership which are not authoritarian and limiting of the activists' freedom (see chapter 4). As argued previously these limitations were framed by the poor analytical quality of the open space concept and by the denial of the crucial



role played by power dynamics and social structures in the “open space”.

## **1. Setting the scene**

To highlight the key features of the political dynamics within WSF2004, I divide the WSF2004 process into 4 phases:

- Phase A, February to April 2003: objectives of WSF2004, organisational structure, functional groups and their leadership and roles, and funding policies, were defined in those months.
- Phase B, April to September 2003: while the organisational tasks slowly turn into daily routine in the Mumbai office, an important intensification of the interactions with the international partners of the WSF and with the Asian counterparts takes place (on issues such as mobilisation, design of the programme and funding).

During these two phases, the political and ideological differences between the actors involved in the organisation of WSF2004 built up to reach confrontational proportions in phase C.

- Phase C, October 2003 to January 2004: was the moment of crucial daily building of tension and stress within the organisational structure, especially in the Mumbai office. The level of tension and conflict often

reached an intensity that made several observers, and organisers as well, doubt that the Mumbai event would take place at all. I discuss in detail the consequences of those tensions and conflict in the Mumbai office in the next chapter.

- Phase D, late January to June 2004: was the moment of evaluation of the Mumbai forum and design of the future for the WSF in India. I deal with the evaluation process and the look ahead towards the future of the WSF in chapter 7.

The process for Mumbai 2004 started in February 2003. Archived the ASF, the immediate concern of the Indian activists was assessing the possibility of holding WSF2004 in India. A National Consultation (NC) was called in Delhi in February. The outcome of the deliberations was a unanimous decision to host WSF2004 in India.

However, some reservations were voiced both by groups within WSF India and by others not ready to commit to the WSF vision (such as NAPM). The main dissent focused on inclusion and democracy of the organisational structure on one side (ASF2003 had exposed exclusive practices by the organisers that left out fundamental actors of ICS), and political relevance of the WSF platform on the other (the WSF was accused by many activists of the more radical left of being a useless “talk shop”). In order to assess the importance of these reservations and to expand the process was held another consultation in Nagpur, in March. A

Preparatory Committee was created<sup>200</sup> in order to facilitate the Nagpur Consultation. To expand the process in India, the invitation to Nagpur was circulated widely through hard and soft media as a response to one of the strongest concerns roaming the WSF India space about marginalising those who were not hooked to the Internet. The necessity of outreach to the biggest number of organisations and activists was voiced by an activist from Hyderabad:

It is also important that all major mass organisations and social movements participation is sought/ensured. Towards this we could ask all state level ASF organisers to hold a meeting, discuss their proposals (...) and nominate representatives for the Nagpur meeting. This also means saying that others who want to come can come as observers (as we want transparency) and not be allowed participation. I know this is difficult but we must strive for it and be strict about it. This is important so that the discussions can have greater credibility and conducted seriously/effectively<sup>201</sup>.

The tone of these reflections highlights the difficulties in relating operationally and strategically to the new 'open space' tool and more traditional political concepts such as transparency (less radical than openness apparently), credibility, representation. Amid this initial confusion, breeding ground for later misunderstandings, the group worked on the following 4 tasks: a) find a place for the January event; b) draft a document on the vision of the WSF India; c) design an organisational structure that ensures democracy, transparency, openness, accountability and efficiency; d) devise a funding policy.

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<sup>200</sup> Four members of organisations directly related to CPIs, six unions members associated to CPIs, one independent union member, two socialists (one of which involved in the struggle for the rights of Adivasi), five Dalit leaders, twelve NGO leaders, four women's group leaders (one associated to the NGO sector and one to the CPIs, two to the Dalit sector).

<sup>201</sup> Prep-Com list, March, 2003.

The leadership of the group is taken informally by a member from Delhi and one from Mumbai in a perfect solution of combined leadership between a CPI-M and an NGO activist. The authority of their leadership was accepted due to their experience of the precedent process, contacts with the BOC and the considerable amount of time and energy employed in working for the group. Moreover, and more importantly, the two members represented the two most important sectors of ISC and balanced each other's leadership ambitions. The organisational structure attracted the greatest effort and the group produced the general configuration of the WSF2004 organisational set up, later approved with little amendments in Nagpur.

The NC in Nagpur started with a review of the work of the preparatory committee. It was noted that the operational mode in small working groups is potentially successful but this had not worked due to the absence of a formal convener, read formal leadership. Followed the complex discussions on the venue, the programme and vision of WSF2004, the organisational structure of the India process and the division of work with IC and IS, the discussion on funding and the setting up of the coordinates for the work of the various committees. Mumbai was chosen as the venue of WSF2004, after a long and heated discussion winning over the southern capital of Kerala. Kerala<sup>202</sup> was governed by the CPI-M led Left Front and the members of that party strenuously fought to have such a great event in their state. Other members, NGOs and single issue movements, denounced their

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<sup>202</sup> The development successes of Kerala and the wide political participation of its citizens are widely discussed: see for instance Heller, 1996 and 2001.

lack of disposition in allowing a full monopolization of WSF2004 by the CPI-M. They did not trust it to be able to perform a soft hegemony over the forum such as that of the PT in Brazil. Delhi was excluded for being the centre of state and civil society bureaucracy and firmly in the hands of CPI-M activists. Mumbai was the place where NGOs and some internationally relevant movements, such as NBA and NAPM, had their basis and a larger political clout. Moreover, an important political pressure in favour of Mumbai was produced by those actors who could show their ability to gather crucial funds for the WSF and who were based in Mumbai. Some practical issues were also considered but were only marginal: Mumbai was better connected to the world through its international airport, the work culture of Mumbai was more efficient and fast and its infrastructure was more solid and modern. The following meeting was in Delhi, in April, where the organisational structure was defined, fine-tuned and made operative.

After Delhi, it was time to present the WSF to Mumbai. The first meeting took place the 9<sup>th</sup> of April and saw the participation of 100 people from 60 organisations from almost all sectors (absent peasants and Adivasi)<sup>203</sup>. That meeting appointed the Mumbai Organising Committee (MOC) which immediately set about finalising role and responsibilities of its Functional Groups (Fgs) and their members and coordinators. The main point of the negotiations, if never openly stated, was the balance of power between sectors and within them in the representation of those forces in committees and working groups. Those political negotiations not always took place openly, for reasons linked to the delicate and

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<sup>203</sup> Minutes of the meeting.

always precarious equilibrium reached within the leadership, but were masked by negotiations on “logistical” issues and “practical” problems. The choice, if probably inevitable due to lack of time, turned to be disastrous (because the conflicts crawled underground) and ideologically unsuccessful because they ended reproducing the de-politicising strategy of neoliberalism (see chapter 1 and 3). The invitation to the meeting stressed its characteristics as an “open meeting” and defined the conditions of this openness as follows:

these meetings are open meetings in which any organisation or individual who has signed the affirmation letter (enclosed) and has sent in a financial contribution is welcome to attend. (...) A registration fee of Rs 150/- per day will be collected from each participant (including those from Mumbai).

The conditions of openness of the WSF in India were subordinated to financial means and ideological allegiance to the Charter (let alone ability to read the invitation circulated in English). This partial openness (this qualified openness) of the WSF India organisational space was never fully discussed and its implications analysed: this constituted the conditions for the explosion of interminable confrontations between those who tried to apply the openness literally (as absolute) and those who never found the right way to justify the inevitable boundaries they were imposing to the space they were creating: another political debate that should have taken place but never really did (see chapter 6). In the following months the activists in Mumbai and Delhi set up gigantic logistics, raised remarkable funds, mobilised participants and designed methodology and programme of the January event.

## **2. Organisational Architecture of WSF2004**

As illustrated above, the organisational structure of the WSF India was built on the basis of the principles of the “open space”. This section shows how the WSF provided the Indian activists with the framework to build the embryo of a solid progressive alliance India and how that process took place in practice in the daily negotiations of inter- and intra-sectoral conflicts within the organisational structure of WSF2004. I argue here that these conflicts created the necessary pre-condition to elaborate a shared discourse and set of practices which promise to make the future communication processes in ICS easier and more meaningful.

The organisational structures of WSF India had to be built taking into consideration years of sectarian interaction within Indian civil society. The devised strategy was not to deal directly with the differences of ideology and political and social positioning in the Indian society (and with the divisions they caused) but to emphasise strategic convergences. However, this did not avoid tough conflicts between members of communist parties, trade unions, NGOs and identity based and single issues movements around leadership, organisation and political agenda of the forum.

The overall organisational structure of WSF2004 was the following. Its wider representative body was the Indian General Council (IGC): it had 135 members that grew later to more than 200. The political body was the India Working

Committee (IWC); it grouped the movements that took part to the organisational process of WSF2004 into 7 sectors: Dalits, Adivasis, Women, *Kisan* & Rural Workers, Working People, Youth & Students, and Other Social Movements & Mass Organisations. The executive body was the Indian Organising Committee (IOC). The single operational tasks were fulfilled by 8 Functional Groups (FG). To minimise the confrontation between those actors, the organisational architecture had each of the 8 FGs coordinated by members of the most involved organisations: the final geography drawn by those coordinators perfectly represented the specific fractures between sectors in India but also their relative influence. Each of the 8 FGs (except the Youth group which had no facilitators) had two facilitators. The Culture group experimented a horizontal collaborative strategy implemented by the mainly NGO activists that made the core group in Mumbai. The de facto exclusion of the second coordinator belonging to an organisation of the CPI and based in Kerala created unending complaints and frustration that resonated throughout the last months of the process. The influence of the sectors of the ICS is clear by observing the list of the facilitators of those groups. NGOs and organisations linked to the communist parties monopolised the leadership of all the groups. Only one peasant activist was member of the Mobilisation group (although its independence from the parties was not absolute) and two important trade unionists were leaders of the Mobilisation and Venue & Logistics groups (each of them affiliated to a union associated to the two main communist parties, CPI and CPI-M). This procedure of allocating tasks and responsibilities in working groups according to sectoral balance, was often



challenged and its limitations widely recognised<sup>204</sup>; however, the necessity to focus on the practical organisation of the WSF, did not allow to devise tools and engage in long and difficult processes to negotiate those divisions. Nonetheless important signs show the beginning of a wider process of trans-sectoral alliance and the attempt to reformulate the belonging to movements by activists (of, for instance, an Adivasi to a mass trade union) and the same structure of the supposedly non-permeable sectors (peasants are often Dalits or Adivasi or women and trade union members are deeply involved into human rights campaigns) of the ICS.

### **3. Inter- and Intra- Sectoral Conflicts in WSF2004**

In what follows I discuss the political terrain of WSF2004 as described by the sectoral divisions of the IWC. I address each sector and discuss the most important inter- and intra-sectoral conflicts and their reasons, articulations and possible outcomes. I detail the tensions that traversed the Dalit movement for questions of internal hegemony and leadership and the conflicts with those accused to replicate in the WSF the marginalisation that affects the Dalits in the wider society; I discuss some crucial struggles within the Women sector on issues of interpretation of femininity and political strategy; and I analyse the important issues that oppose NGOs and leftist movements along ideological lines. In this

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<sup>204</sup> In the February 2004 meeting in Mumbai, a member of the Finance group with energy denounced those practices and the actors performing them, suggesting that a part of the Indian civil society is still stuck in the past with respect to political practices. In the WSF those practices are challenged and relegated to the archives of political history. If the same won't happen in India, the WSF will fail and become one more instrument for political hegemony by activists of the communist parties (those representing the old political culture *par excellence*).

section I show the specific ways in which the fragmentation of ICS discussed in chapter 2 is performed in the organisational space of WSF2004. I maintain here that the WSF is offering an important opportunity to activists of the ICS to negotiate their differences and the conflicts those generated. The dimension of that space, its specific rules and goals, configure, contain and direct those conflicts in ways that seem to be able to prove more constructive than those so far experienced in the decades of platforms, alliances and converges in the ICS. The final picture looks rather confused and at times grim, but the constructive energy that traverses WSF India will become evident (see especially chapter 7) and will substantiate the argument of this thesis about the ability of the WSF to catalyse extensive convergences of civil society organisations on national scales (and beyond).

### **3.1 Dalits**

The participation of Dalits in ASF2003 and WSF2004 was massive<sup>205</sup> (in Mumbai they were one third of the participants). Many considered this the main feature of WSF India and full acknowledgment by all social and political activists that no radical change can happen in India without the Dalits (Callinicos, 2004; Hayden, 2004; Sen, 2004)<sup>206</sup>. But their position of extreme marginalisation in Indian society poses problems to civil society activists that were only marginally addressed during WSF2004. As reported above (see also chapters 3 and 4) harsh

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<sup>205</sup> Diedrich, 2004; Wright, 2005.

<sup>206</sup> ASF list, February 2003.

confrontations took place between Dalits and other leaders of the forum due to the marginalisation of Dalits in the organisational process of the Mumbai forum. Many accusations exposed the Hindu and high caste background of the vast majority of the WSF India leadership. Some Dalit leaders also accused members of the Programme committee (see chapter 7) of monopolising the programme of the forum while deliberately marginalising Dalit initiatives. These issues limited very much the chances of meaningful political negotiation between some Dalit organisations and other activists. Yet they created an embryonic opportunity structure for constructive dialogue to be established between Dalits and other sectors of Indian civil society.

From the organisational point of view, the active participation of Dalit leaders from the beginning of the process produced interesting dynamics that introduced new dialogic strategies and establish new alliances in the Indian environment. There was a shared awareness among the leadership of the Dalit movement, that they had an enormous wealth of contributions to provide to WSF2004<sup>207</sup>. This awareness was shared by the broad WSF leadership, but beyond the awareness and the genuine desire to bridge the gaps between the various groups of activists (and between their leaders) the tension between the Dalit spokespeople and other IOC members was at times high. The main tensions arose over issues of representation in the organisational process and influence in the decision-making

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<sup>207</sup> On the IOC list, in April 2003, a Dalit leader wrote: "Dalits are the largest marginalised section of South Asia. They are the worst victims of neo-liberalisation and its mechanisation (...). we must remember that WSF-IV is (...) the culmination of a Global WSF Process (...) Therefore, our programme must have universal concerns and appeal. (...) keeping casteism, racism, racial discrimination and all other forms of discrimination that deny dignified existence of human being".

process. On one side leadership was resisted against the hegemonic attempts of the activists linked to the CPIs (many in the Programme group and the Delhi office). On the other side the Dalits offered themselves as potential hegemonic force in ICS on the basis of their vast mobilisation. Due to the clash of leaderships and hegemonies the atmosphere of many political (IWC and IGC) and organisational (IOC) meetings was tense<sup>208</sup>. Activists confronted each other on issues of discrimination toward Dalit activists. In an instance, a Nacdor leader reported the alleged machinations against the Dalit initiatives, and in particular the World Dignity Forum (WDF), to the BOC and the IC. But if moments of tension were frequent between Dalit organisers (or some of them) and the other IOC members, frictions happened also between Dalit leaders exposing another crucial problem of Dalit activism in India: its chronic fragmentation due to personal politics and strenuous power competition<sup>209</sup>.

However the activities and the prominence of the Dalits in WSF2004 gave them a big stage to voice their concerns and to have an international audience learn of their position in India. Moreover, the harsh conflicts within the organisational space constituted the beginning of a potentially successful process of commensuration of languages and interests between Dalit and other Indian

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<sup>208</sup> I was present during many harsh confrontations taking place during NCs, IOC meetings and within the IYC process were precise accusations of marginalisation of Dalit activists produced embarrassment to many activists and exposed dynamics that many thought would never take place within the WSF process.

<sup>209</sup> Around mid October, one of the leaders of a Dalit movement used the IOC mailing list to report the fact that his organisation was kept away from the main mobilising events organised by the other Dalit groups. Immediate responses from two other leaders were sharp and denounced an atmosphere of tension between Dalit allies. A Dalit leader in response to the allegations wrote: "As you know this is an open space, please take a proactive interest and go ahead". On the frictions between NCDHR and NACDOR concerned comments were made at the evaluation meeting in Mumbai 28-29<sup>th</sup> February, highlighting the fact that intra-sectoral unity has to be deeply negotiated (personal notes).

activists that can considerably strengthen politically the ICS. On the other side, Dalits have a great ability to network globally<sup>210</sup> and to link Dalit issues to those of other marginalised groups from Africa, Europe and Latin America such as the group Quilombo from Brazil and the transnational network No-VOx. A very interesting interaction between Indian Dalits and international activists was led by NCDHR and the No-Vox network. The Dalit Swadhikar Rally, (Dalits Rally for the Assertion of Rights), started from 4 different locations in India (Jammu, Kolkata, Kanyakumari, and Delhi) reached Mumbai after traversing the country mobilising for the Mumbai event (Thekaekara, 2004). The objective of the rallies was also to build activist networks across India, and with the help of the foreign partners to establish global networks and design common actions. This transnational link showed the ability of the Dalits to take full advantage of the potentialities of alliances across borders (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Khagram et al. 2002; Smith et al., 1997).

The main initiative of the Dalit groups within the WSF framework was the WDF. The main organisers were the 4 groups that formed the Dalit contingent within the IWC (Nacdor, NCDHR, NDC, and NFDW). The WDF aimed at exposing and creating the necessary alliances to fight exclusion and discrimination based on casteism, racism, work and descent. The two spokespeople chosen by the Dalit movements to represent their cause and the linkages with the cause of all marginalised people on the planet were the former Indian president K.R. Narayanan and Nelson Mandela.

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<sup>210</sup> IOC list, June 2003. See also Moliner, 2004.

The Dalit participation to WSF2004 exposed also interesting contradictions: many had the impression that some of the Dalit groups were reproducing old ways of politics especially when it came to personalistic and clientelist politics (Callinicos, 2004). On the other side Dalit organisations were accused to share characteristics and limitations attributed to NGOs, first of all the dependence from foreign funding and the shifting allegiances that this produces (Karat, 1988; Suzuki, 2000; Kamat, 2004). These caustic critiques have been widely voiced by activists of MR2004 and by many of those involved in the organisation of WSF2004 although in a more whispered way not to open a contentious field of confrontation with a crucial ally and generous contributor to the finances of the Forum. The Dalit possible hegemony was undermined by their allegiance to old practices and by their a-political links to the NGO world and powerful foreign funders.

### **3.2 Religious Groups**

The tension between Indian religious groups are cause of some of the most painful conflicts in India (Sen and Wagner, 2004; Desai, 2004). Centred on the pernicious use of identity politics, India has seen continuous waves of religious intolerance burning its villages and towns. Mumbai itself was theatre of religious riots between Hindus and Muslims in December 2002 and January 2003. WSF2004 could have played a central role in imagining a different interaction between religious groups, but the engagement was superficial and the outcome deceiving, confirming the depth of the gap between them. The participation of religious

groups in WSF2004 was limited to Catholic and Christian organisations. Attempts to approach Muslim organisation were shy whereas Hindu progressive organisations were mentioned as possible partners in WSF2004 only as potential sources of funding, but nothing was done in the end. The contribution by Christian organisations to the resources of WSF2004 was consistent and fully legitimised their role in the organisational process. Several religious people both Catholic and from other denominations, were members of IOC and FGs and the infrastructure of their organisations was used for WSF2004<sup>211</sup>. This imbalance in participation by religious activists did not fail to cause many conflicts within the IOC and without it. In December a tense conversations on the inclusiveness of the WSF in India involved a Muslim activist from Bangalore, three members of the IOC and myself. Ahmed (see Chapter 4) lucidly exposed how the absence of Muslims in the organisational framework of WSF India reinforced the structures of power of Indian society by allowing them to fully determine the social structures of the WSF. Moreover, the mild excuses made along the lines of the non-confessionality of the WSF space were, on one side, contradicted by the presence of Christian and Catholic religious people, and on the other uncritically accepted a political framework created elsewhere (in Brazil) where religious issues were not so constitutive of some of the main social fractures as it was in the Indian case. If in India religion will be the field of contention only of obscurantist fanatics and never reclaimed by the progressive civil society citizens, the spaces for interactions and negotiation will be inevitably restricted leaving only space for confrontations, riots and terrorist attacks. The case of Ahmed exposed the

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<sup>211</sup> The YMCA in South Mumbai and the Athma Darshan in Andheri (Catholic) were often used as convention centres for the IOC meetings. The Salesian school in Matunga was the venue chosen for the Youth Camp of WSF2004.

dynamics of a lost opportunity and its pernicious potential consequences in further dividing Indians along religious lines and in reinforcing the despair and the radicalisation of members of the different communities. This case exposes the limited vision of the hegemonic powers in the WSF India and their (inevitable they claimed) lack of courage in dealing with such sensitive topic. Moreover, it exposes, as lucidly discussed by Daulatzai (2004) the universalist grounds on which most of the WSF still stands. The consequences of the allegedly secular universalism for the WSF were the alienation of a fundamental portion of the India society and at a global scale the alienation of a large section of the second biggest religious group on the planet. In Chatterjee's (2002) words the struggle between the political society in which the Indian Muslims live and the civil society of the social forum will determine the scope and the relevance of that sphere and its ability to determine the Indian political and social landscape.

### **3.3 Peasants**

The relationship between peasant movements and WSF India has not been fully successful. Peasants have resisted the CPIs and NGOs struggle for leadership since the beginning of the WSF India process. In ASF2003 a strong debate took place between KRRS and the organisers of the ASF, which led to the organisation of a separate forum in Hyderabad, the People's Movements Encounter. KRRS is perhaps one of the best known Indian movements and has an impressive record of actions and mobilisation against neoliberalism (Pattenden, 2005). The reasons for this detachment was detailed by the leader of KRRS in a virtual debate with the



leader of ATTAC, Cassen: they referred to the marginal role of social movements in the decision-making process of WSF India, in turn dominated by corporate NGOs and by the (not too well) disguised interference of the bureaucracy of the CPI-M; Moreover, the interests of both of them are in contrast with those of the peasants they represent: NGOs privilege cities as stage for their actions and communist parties stress the role of industrialisation for development and historically marginalised peasants struggles.

However, the importance of peasants and rural workers was always stressed by the leaders of WSF India as witnessed by early calls for national conventions of peasants mobilising for WSF India. It was considered so important that one of the coordinators of the mobilisation group of WSF2004 was the national convener of the National Campaign Committee for Rural Workers (see Nisula and Patomaki, 2002) and union activist for the right to work for rural and agricultural workers with decades of experience as a mobiliser in the rural sector. But the overall response from peasants and agricultural workers' was lukewarm due to the labour orientation given to the the problems of the rural sector by TUs and CPIs. Many of those organisations joined MR2004 which claimed to represent all Indian peasants. The significant implications of this apparent split, along the city vs. rural sector divide, were discussed by many organisers of WSF2004: India has 70% of its population living in rural areas where the majority of poverty is located; the activists in MR2004 accused WSF2004 to reproduce the unbridgeable divide that the liberal westernised Indian government had dug between privileged cities and destitute countryside. However, it was repeatedly noted that the rural/urban divide

does not represent the complexities of the participation of peasant movements to the events in Mumbai: the split was, in fact, “within” the peasant movement (see Shah, 2004).

The reason from this dramatic split has deep roots: the India rural sector has been crossed by many divides between activists. Populists movements, movements associated with the communist parties, more radical Maoist groups and advocacy activists are yet to find the way to engage in a fully meaningful dialogue which encompasses the interests of all of them and mediates the claims by landless peasants, small farmers and rural workers. Populism especially has been one of the most important features of peasant movements in India and accused of smuggling the liberal development agenda in the Indian countryside (Gupta, 1997; Nanda, 1999). The way in which populist tendencies have been exploited by some of the most successful peasant movements, such as KRRS and BKU, has created substantial barriers with other sectors for its exclusionary nature towards lower caste and landless peasants (Pattenden, 2005; Nanda, 1999<sup>212</sup>). At play in the peasant sectors were, as seen above, hegemonic discourses with profound roots in the Indian history crossed by, among others, the conflicts between Leninist and Maoist activists, between modernist and traditionalist activists, between those who saw the rural sector as the space of primitive accumulation and those who saw (the Gandhians for instance) the rural village as the highest expression of the Indian culture.

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<sup>212</sup> For the recurrence of these divisions in the global context see Edelman, 1999.

### 3.4 Social movements

Extremely critical of the monopolisation of ASF2003 by NGOs and CPI-M were, as the peasant activists discussed in the previous paragraph, the single issue movements gathered under the NAPM umbrella. After ASF2003, the general feeling NAPM had was that ASF2003 was a failure in which the hegemonic intentions of the usual suspects were openly unmasked. After the immediate reaction though, more reflection and intense negotiations with members of the IOC made the leadership of NAPM reconsider their position. Finally NAPM joined the WSF2004 process and contributed resources and organisational experience through its representative in the IOC<sup>213</sup>. The reasons for this were to be found in the strategic convenience to use the Mumbai stage for their interest and campaigns, but also to the intense negotiation lead by some members of the IOC who knew what a loss of image and legitimacy would have been the defection by the organisation of one of the most charismatic leaders of Indian movements and member of the IC, Medha Patkar. At the political level of the WSF India, which I am concerned with in this chapter, the NAPM was not involved in any major conflict with the *hegemons* of the process (CPIM and NGOs activists). The reasons were twofold: NAPM used the WSF as a platform for its own campaigns and committed only relatively to the organisational process and because of the direct connection between some very powerful NGO leaders in the IOC and the

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<sup>213</sup> NAPM was member of WSF2004 since Nagpur and it nominated a member to the IOC in September.

NBA (leader organisation of NAPM).

Although NAPM was officially part of the organisation of WSF2004, the position of many of the members of the coalition was ambiguous and significant doubts on the nature and scope of the WSF were raised as late as the 29<sup>th</sup> October, when a document raising a set of questions on the nature of the WSF was circulated by an NAPM activist. That document asked the following: is the WSF strongly committed against imperialism? What are, if any, the privileged actors that can bring about a victory against empire? Does the WSF consider moderate NGOs as critical allies in that struggle? Does the WSF, in its condemnation of violence, reject the role of the armed struggles for national liberation such as the Viet-Cong or the struggles lead by Che Guevara? The provocation of the writer mentions the name of some of the heroes of the liberation struggle for Indian independence, Bhagat Singh and Surya Sen, and wonders what would be the position of the IOC if they were alive and wanted to join the WSF. Another object of contention is the participation in MR2004, the letter explains that many will take part in that meeting as well, and they wonder if that constitutes a problem. The letter also has critical words towards the rigidity of the Charter and explores the possibility of making it flexible, rather than a Bible of the global movement<sup>214</sup>.

Not long before the Mumbai event, NAPM published a document in which fully clarified its position towards the WSF and declared its fundamental political stand. According to NAPM in India Adivasi, Dalit, women and the working

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<sup>214</sup> Letter circulated in the IOC list, 29 October 2003.

class<sup>215</sup> are the most vulnerable sections of society and the most affected by neoliberalism. It is necessary to join their struggles and change their condition urgently. Especially they consider necessary to reformulate India's policy on resource management in order to avoid the extinction of those groups that depend on them, the Adivasi. NAPM enemies are state corruption, criminal politics, ethnic and communal forces, casteism and the oppression of the international institutions that are causing the "social disintegration, economic deprivation and identity crisis resulting out of the politico-economic onslaught faced by the increasing number of people in this largest democracy not worth the name"<sup>216</sup>. The document refers to some of the different positions on the WSF still present within NAPM but it confirms the belief that joining in a movement based on the solidarity between actors of the civil society from all over the world is absolutely necessary to effectively tackle the institutional framework of world dominance. The eclectic approach to social change and resistance to neoliberalism, it is claimed by NAPM, is more successful than the monolithic approach of the traditional left; NAPM also recognises in the WSF the same productive eclecticism and points toward that to surpass the positions of incommensurability between movements of the old and new tradition.

The main activities within the framework of the WSF2004 highlighting the campaigns of the Adivasi peoples of India were linked to NAPM. It is necessary to also briefly mention that from within the IOC some attempts were made to mobilise as wide as possible a contingent of Adivasi. The logistics of the

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<sup>215</sup> As expressed in an "Appeal to join in solidarity towards transformation", circulated in November 2003.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

mobilisation process were discussed in the IOC meeting in Chandigarh on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August and again on the IOC list few weeks after. Finally on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December a mobilisation event was organised in Delhi as a National Consultation of Indigenous People<sup>217</sup>. Yet no Adivasi were part of the IOC or the IWC.

### **3.5 Trade Unions**

Unions are a fundamental transnational actor involved in the global movement that produced the WSF (Evans, 2000; Waterman, 2004 and 2007; Waterman and Timms, 2005; Munch, 2004; Beaudet, 2005). At WSF2004 thousands of union members crowded the venue (Harman and Prasad, 2004): they provided WSF India with legitimising political relevance, contributed important resources and some of the most active organisers of the Mumbai event and showed a consistent trend for engaged relations between TUs and WSF (Waterman, 2003c). This partnership is important for both actors: due to the mobilising capability of TUs and the nature of the WSF as a privileged stage to offer a renewed image of the TUs that could stop the continuous decline in membership and political relevance of the last decades.

All the main Indian TUs joined WSF2004: AITUC, AIFTU, CITU, AICCTU,

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<sup>217</sup> Intense negotiations on other main activities of indigenous people's groups took place in the framework of the Programme working group where many pushed for a day long event on indigenous issues, see for instance the minutes of the Programme meeting in Mumbai on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November where a long section of the meeting was dedicated to the importance to include a space for specific issues on resource management, land, water and food sovereignty that dealt with the importance of the contribution in these issues by the Adivasis.

NTUI, HMS<sup>218</sup>. Key figures in the TU movement in India also worked as international mobilisers travelling to Geneva, Athens, Kuala Lumpur and Seoul. Those who played a most important role were members of CITU, AITUC and NTUI. Unions in India are directly affiliated to the communist parties so AITUC is linked to the CPI and CITU, the biggest Indian union, to the CPI-M; NTUI is a non-partisan initiative although informally close to the CPI-M. In this context, the accusations of hegemony against the CPI-M over WSF2004 were also motivated by the fundamental role played by CITU whose secretary facilitated the Liaison FG which dealt with the government of India.

The Trade Unions in India were protagonist of a considerable change of attitude towards the WSF process. So if their participation was non-existent in ASF2003, their role was crucial in WSF2004. Once they set their strategic priorities along those of their respective parties, those in turn convinced by their members involved in WSF India since the beginning, they contributed not only to the organisation of the Mumbai forum but also to the consolidation of the CPIs hegemony in the whole process. Some of their members were protagonists of the most heated conflicts that traversed the WSF2004 process (see next chapter) and that were centred on the hegemonic struggle for the leadership of the process fought with NGO activists.

If the enthusiastic participation of TUs to WSF2004 solved, or conveniently

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<sup>218</sup> Mobilisation meeting minutes, 20<sup>th</sup> August. "After the mobilisation meeting held in Mumbai on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May a new group of unions join the mobilisation group: Mumbai Port Trust Dock & General Employees Union, National Union of Seafarers of India, Maritime Union of India, Western Railway Employees Union, Transport & Dock Workers Union, Keshav Gore Trust, Maharashtra State Transport". The 30<sup>th</sup> of July join ICL and ICFTU".

negotiated the diffidence that characterised the relationship between unions and WSF India, conflicts between "WSF unions" and outsiders were harsh. Accusations were launched of co-operation with the empire by influential TU leaders; in particular, in an open letter by the Joint Convener of the Trade Union Solidarity Committee in Mumbai the 24<sup>th</sup> of June. The main concerns expressed in that letter referred to a) the political approach to imperialism; b) the motives to engage in a resource intensive operation with the WSF which risks to be just a world talk shop; c) the provenance of the funds; d) the nature of the WSF; e) the issue of non-violence with special reference to armed struggle of self defence; f) the achievement of the vision of the forum as a class-less world. Moreover,

Is it the objective of the WSF to create "another world" where workers, businessmen (whether small or big) and even the representatives of Imperialist Governments (who will be attending WSF in their "personal capacity") would remain together without divided and contradictory interests? Since the charter of principles of the WSF advocates "mutual" recognition among its participant organisations and movements, as well as among the participants and movements, and given that the WSF guidelines include workers, on the one hand, and businessmen and industrialist, on the other, isn't such "mutual" recognition tantamount to workers accepting the system of exploitation as it exists? (Vasudevan, 2003)

An authoritative response to these issues is designed by the secretary of CITU:

The WSF is neither a movement nor an organisation (...). It seeks to provide space just for debate, formulating of proposals, exchange of experience and visions of another world. (...) it is a continuation of the struggle against imperialist globalisation. (...) The Charter clearly states its opposition to "domination by capitalism and any form of imperialism". (...) there is an upcoming



trend, nationally as well as internationally, where NGOs claiming to represent the 'civil society', have been critical of political parties and traditional mass movements/organisations. (...) The WSF, which is inclusive, diverse and open to pluralism, is participated by such NGOs as well. (...) utilising the platform of WSF, mass organisations and social movements can and have come out with action programmes. The February 15th protest against US war on Iraq was one such occasion. (...) The WSF process precludes party representations in the forum. But this should not be construed to view WSF as an 'apolitical' forum. Globalisation is the political agenda of imperialism and resistance thereto also has per force to be political. (Varada Rajan, 2003)

These explanations triggered a further reply by the ILC, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October:

[the WSF] presents itself as a framework for discussing the issue of globalization. And for us, the entire framework of that discussion - as formulated in the main documents of the WSF - is questionable because these documents imply there should be a consensual agreement on points which are contradictory, in our opinion, with the class independence of workers' organizations and the requirements of an effective struggle against capitalist exploitation. (...) The ambiguity is reinforced by the permanent use of the formula "civil society." But isn't that civil society divided into social classes? Isn't society divided between exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed? (Ibid.)

This debate goes through the terms of the articulation of the expression "civil society" as discussed in Chapter 1. It is possible to recognise a Marxian versus Gramscian approach: the Indian TUs accept "civil society" as the arena where the war of position between capital and labour is fought; the critics highlight how according to Marx "civil society" could only be a bourgeois "civil society". Another crucial issue of debate and conflict refers to the use of violence. In the Charter the participation is excluded to "military organisations" and what follows

is the reaction by the ILC member:

"Military organizations" could be national liberation movements which have had to resort to military action against imperialism and colonialism. This label could very well have applied in the past to the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, or to the Algerian National Liberation Front, and could apply today, for instance, to the PLO. (...) The way in which the WSF is funded is a legitimate concern. (...) Let us remember that previous WSFs were funded by various sources, including, for instance, the Ford Foundation, the UN Development Program and the departments of foreign affairs of various governments (Ibid.).

If the ambiguity is present it has to be put in perspective. The WSF does not claim to include all forms of action against neoliberalism, neither to be the only initiative against capitalism. The WSF framework is based on a model of civil society that acknowledges the role of armed independence movements, however, under the influence of the Liberation theology on one side, the anti-war movement and its Buddhist inspiration on the other side and the crucial Gandhian experience in India has made of non-violence its strategy. It is of course to be expected that such engaged debates continue within the WSF and with its critics in so far highlighting its strategic potentialities. The debate reported above was not only, not even mainly, one between Indian and foreign activists on political minutiae. The intervention of the CITU secretary was part of the process to legitimise first the political efficacy of the WSF and then the hegemonic role of those organisations that were leading the WSF process in India (CPIs in particular).

### 3.6 Women

One more sector that was a field of confrontation between contrasting hegemonic forces in the WSF India was the women's sector. Feminist and women's movements are crucial actors of ICS. The past thirty years saw a flourishing of hundreds of organisations, campaigns, platforms, alliances that have produced considerable debate on issues such as patriarchy, violence, sexual exploitation and men domination (John, 2005; Omvedt, 1992 and 1994). The range of positions varies: from grassroots women activists to left Parties women organisations. This fragmentation (or creative difference), was fully reflected in WSF2004 (Srivastava, 2005; John, 2005). Interesting complexities were produced both within the Women's platform<sup>219</sup> and in the interaction with other groups. The differences between the many women activists that contributed to the mobilisation of the Women Sector often produce strident conflicts. Illustration of this was the complex relationship established between leftist, liberal and religious women activists: see for instance the following debate. The 21<sup>th</sup> of May a religious leader writes:

Women as a whole show in this forum that we women are change agents and we make difference in every form of social evil exists by inculcating women as spiritual and peace loving and peace embracing person. Eg. having an hour of music and silence at a particular time-attracting the whole crowd to enter in silence (non violence).

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<sup>219</sup> All India Democratic Women's Association, All India Progressive Women's Association, Mahila Dakshata Samiti, National Federation of Indian Women, National Network of Autonomous Women's Organisations, National Alliance for Womens Organisations, North East Network, Sangat.

Another activist, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, writes along fairly different lines:

It seems that there is just one big panel discussion on women, to be organized by 'the WSF', and that is formulated as "Dialogue, Debate (socialism, feminism)". (Might as well have said "Socialism vs Feminism"). (...) I suggest the one main theme for women as, "Women and Patriarchal Capitalism". All women are affected by Patriarchal Capitalism, in the developing (...) as well as the 'developed' world and its compulsive need for war, expansion and domination, its compulsive need to eat up and use all the world's resources, natural and otherwise. (...) I can envisage all sorts of women's groups, networks, organizations, individuals mobilized under Women and Patriarchal Capitalism, (or something like that). I somehow just cannot see the same under "Dialogue, Debate: Socialism, Feminism.

A MOC member suggests switching the order of the crucial words to "Capitalist Patriarchy". Her suggestions raises the concerns of a professor of the University of Mumbai: "does this mean that patriarchy does not exist in non-semi capitalist, feudal set-ups?". These differences caused strong frictions in the women's mobilisation group of which the conflict between the coordinator of the women mobilisation group and the representatives of the Women's Movements Caucus is an example. The conflict in question brewed for a long time and started appearing in semi-official documents around the middle of the summer. Masked as a crucial procedural issue of democratic mechanisms in WSF2004 but in fact related to important ideological differences as exposed above, the conflict finally exploded in late August between an IOC member (a Catholic activist) and a Tamilian activist member of the The National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups (NNAWG):

The minutes you have received is of the women's movement sectoral meeting jointly organised by the All India Democratic Association [AIDWA], the National Alliance of Women's Organisation [NAWO] and the National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups [NNAWG]. (...) These mutilated minutes have been circulated to all of you [by Maria, fictitious name] as minutes of a meeting held by "All India WSF women's meet". This is a gross violation of democratic functioning and an imposition of a member of the IOC on a meeting of the women's movement. (...) Secondly, this is not the first time she has refused to heed the decisions taken collectively in the women's movement meetings. (...) We would like to clearly state that she in no way represents the women's movement caucus<sup>220</sup>.

The issues raised here are so crucial not only for the women mobilisation but for the democratic mechanisms of WSF2004 that are immediately addressed during an MOC meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> September. These are the conclusions reached unanimously:

No individual member of the IOC or that of a functional group can seek to be the sole representative of a sector or a region within the WSF. Meetings within the WSF or minutes of meetings cannot be used to subvert this critical and core democratic collective principal of the WSFs functioning<sup>221</sup>.

This was not the only context where conflicts involved women in WSF2004. The questions referring to the role of marginalised groups, their mobilisation strategies and their attitudes towards each other, created competitions to establish who was more marginalised and deserved further positive discrimination in the process. The following message was sent to the IOC list on 15<sup>th</sup> May:

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<sup>220</sup> IOC list, September 2003.

<sup>221</sup> Minutes of the meeting.

I don't want to equate gender balance with other balances though it has always been our (women's) experience that the moment you raise the issue of gender balance, all other balances start competing with gender! (...) I would have been happier had the issues of regional/political/sectoral minorities representation had come up independent of my suggestion on gender balance!

Few hours later a Dalit leader:

I have been insisting for the Sectoral Balance, especially for the Dalits, right from the beginning in our process for WSF. As you rightly pointed it out, it has been our experience also that unless we keep on raising this, Dalits would be sidelined though it is not intentional.

The third context in which gender issues had to be fought strenuously by women was the space which, meant to be open and respectful of differences and specificities, was instead plagued by patriarchy: the WSF2004 process itself. This syndrome was reported in reference to previous forums and constitutes one of the major contradictions of the WSF (Klein, 2003; Nobre, 2003; World March of Women, 2003; Vargas, 2003 and 2005). The contribution by women to WSF2004 was paramount, however astonishing power dynamics and consistent exclusion took place within the forum and all the women I interviewed were consistent in denouncing practices of exclusion, patronising behaviour and clear imbalances between operative roles, mostly covered by women, and political roles, covered by men. The first call for a women's meeting in Mumbai within the framework of WSF2004, issued on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, highlighted the fact that "Not many women are involved in this process at this moment". Gender sensibility is not well trained

in WSF2004<sup>222</sup>. The 15<sup>th</sup> of May an MOC member noted that “there is no woman facilitator so far for any of the FGs”. The occasion of the launch of the Delhi SF gives space to formulate again the recurrent concerns about women's issues being overlooked when organising important events in the WSF framework:

women's concerns are missing in the plan for the DSF. I hope that they are adequately dealt with in each of the theme and for example that issues of labour will look at not only unorganised labour but unpaid labour of women and the double burden faced by women workers. The women's issues are usually looked at in terms of impact of a particular phenomenon on them and I am sure you are aware that the analysis from women's perspective has gone much beyond that<sup>223</sup>.

In the women's sector, as in other sectors as shown above, political conflict made of feminist issues one more field of confrontation between left party organisations and activists and NGOs activists. Feminism encountered gender issues and identity politics engaged class politics. In the next sections I finally discuss the actions and interests of the two main contenders of the WSF India leadership.

### **3.7 Parties...**

The WSF seeks to move away from the model of vanguardist and hierarchical party politics and experiments alternative organisational forms and configurations of civil society. The traditional hegemonic strategy played by political parties

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<sup>222</sup> IOC list, April 2003: “It had been decided that ‘the participating organisations in IWC are expected to subscribing to the Charter principles of WSF and involved in efforts to resist neo-liberal globalisation, patriarchy, casteism and communalism’. However, from the second para of the affirmation letter we find the word ‘patriarchy’ missing”.

<sup>223</sup> IOC list December 2003.

within the WSF as part of their natural attitude to monopolise spaces and discourses in order to push for their interests is strongly opposed from several sides for being at odds with the reciprocal learning process that is at the core of the WSF. At another level, the distrust in party politics is a total distrust for representative politics and a desire to explore more participatory and radically democratic ways of living the political. The stand toward political parties described in the Charter is unequivocal: they are not allowed in the WSF although party members in their personal capacity can attend official events. This aspect of the WSF charter has provoked intense debate within and around the WSF. The positions vary considerably (Dowling, 2004) and range from a respectful acknowledgement of the role of parties in modern democracy and their role of strategic supporters to the WSF (Correa Leite, 2003), to a stronger position against the interference of professional politicians in the WSF (Whitaker, 2003 and 2005b). To these radical positions Santos (2005) opposes one that critically assesses the historical specificities of the relations between civil societies and parties in specific national contexts without drawing a-priori conclusions.

Although not fully expressed in Whitaker's work, it seems plausible that his warning to parties not to absorb the WSF but take advantage of the fertile ground that they are sowing, may point toward creating a wide area of progressive thinking which will choose a political referent to engage state politics, and the natural referent can't be any other than the leftist parties (Sader, 2003; Nigam, 2005). It is in fact the case that wherever strong forums have taken place electoral successes have gratified the traditional left parties (see the case of Brazil for



instance). An attitude that fully represents this strategic relationship between parties and WSF is the one articulated by Italian PRC which in its congress of 2003 voted to support the “movement of movements”. The nature of this support was defined as non hegemonic and designing configurations that represent the horizontal articulation of the components of a process both educational and political (Rifondazione Comunista, 2003).

The fundamental anomaly that animates the debate is the lack of correspondence between Charter and reality of the WSF. In the case of Brazil all the members of the original BOC, although not directly answerable to the PT, gravitated in its political area, making the neat distinction between their politics and agenda and that of the PT very hard if not meaningless (Waterman, 2003c; Sader, 2003). In the case of WSF2004, the criticisms toward the hegemonic role of the CPI-M in particular and the heavy involvement of the CPI and some currents of the CPI-ML rose from many sides (Sen, 2004). Social movements such as NAPM, NGOs and grassroots activists found unacceptable the invasion of the WSF space by parties (Nigam, 2005; Sen, 2004b). The communist parties performed their hegemonic practices over the forum in several ways (Sen, 2004): by providing a political and ideological framework that directed the interpretation of the “open space”, by providing authority to their people in the organisational process, by providing a network of contacts and influence crucial when dealing with the Indian bureaucracy, by providing human resources and knowledge to the actual process.

Given the complexity of the Indian political scenario and the effective conflictual

outcome of the parties' engagement with other actors of the ICS, it is crucial here to analyse the regulatory framework that the WSF India provided itself with to tame the inevitable contradictions. The Bhopal document states that parties are not allowed in the WSF as direct organisers and that the Indian organisers will abide by the rules set by the Charter although the WSF India process will have "members of organisations that are affiliated with particular parties and it is consulting with leaders of political parties as it is with leaders of civil organisations". This is a crucial passage: party members are not directly engaged as party members but as activists in mass movements and civil organisations. This ambiguity, not different in the Brazilian context, has not been dealt with in the WSF: on one side political parties have lost the trust of many activists; on the other side a clear elaboration of a democratic form not based on party politics has not yet been done, and, it is arguable, is beyond the interests of the members of the WSF. A further passage in the same document is enlightening of the complex Indian environment and shows how the WSF initiators had to juggle their position in order to create the most conducive possible "space" to new alliances:

The question of the role of political parties in the WSF process is under debate, and we need to continue this debate in more detail over this next period. (...). At the level of theory and principle, political parties are and can be considered equally as one more form of everyday associational life – and therefore a part of civil society and as much as civil society is not separate from the state but dialectically linked to it. At a practical level, there is definitely a burning need for some kind of space where party and party-related actors and civil (non-party) actors can meet and exchange ideas on a sustained and comprehensive basis (...). We propose that the only exception to this rule is that there are some leaders whose stature transcends limited party roles and they have acceptability as national level leaders. These leaders can be asked to be part of the WSF Advisory

Committee. Mass organisations although many are lead by people belonging to political parties, will naturally be part of the process.

The ambiguities of this document and the opening to individuals affiliated to political parties and leaders of those parties, were necessary in the specific environment where WSF India started blossoming<sup>224</sup>: it would have been, in fact, difficult if not impossible to organise anything of the size and complexity of a WSF without the political support and the organisational and logistic backing of political parties. The same ambiguities, created confusion and conflicts between parties and other actors of the ICS in WSF2004.

The harshest conflicts were those between political parties and NGOs. In 1988 Prakash Karat (leader of the CPI-M) articulated an unmitigated condemnation against those defined as internal enemies of the country and instruments of the empire whose money they were using. He wrote: "By providing liberal funds to these groups, imperialism has created avenues to penetrate directly vital sections of Indian society and simultaneously use this movement as a vehicle to counter and disrupt the potential of the Left movement". The approach of the CPI-M has changed somewhat towards foreign funds and NGOs, however the debate around the scarce resources at disposal of civil society moved, thanks also to these conflicts, to more complex positions that took into considerations alternative ways

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<sup>224</sup> IOC list, 31 October (by CPI-M activists): "The WSF is a non-partisan platform. By not having political parties as part of the WSF, the WSF space can be effectively used to attract the widest sections who are opposed to imperialist globalisation. But this does not mean (...) that people who work with or are members of political parties, are barred from the WSF. To the contrary, a large number of persons who work closely with political parties participate in the WSF. The difference is that in the space provided by the WSF, they do not represent a particular political party".

to access, use and save resources, often in line with the Gandhian concept of self-reliance (Sen, 2002). This debate started in a very energetic manner within the WSF India process, but it got soon put aside due to lack of time; it however hinted at a further way in which the WSF can facilitate the elaboration of alternative sophisticated mediations of decades long conflicts.

### **3. 8 ...and NGOs**

The role played by NGOs in WSF2004 was fundamental. The finance group was lead by two renowned NGO activists as it was the culture group; NGO activists were involved in the programme, international mobilisation and in the communication groups. However, NGOs have been challenged consistently both within and without WSF2004. NGOs alleged hegemony was one of the reasons why radical left activists decided to organise a parallel counter-forum (MR2004) rather than join WSF2004. The criticism towards NGOs was not exclusive feature of WSF2004: suspicion against them has found a great number of supporters who alternatively stressed the risk of co-option that a movement hegemonised by NGOs has to face given their reliance from and allegiance to funders (Ugurlor cited in Jampaglia, 2002; Milstein, 2002)<sup>225</sup>. Sader (2003) reflects that "the very fact of defining themselves as 'non-governmental' explicitly rejects any ambition on the NGOs' part for an alternative hegemonic project, which would, by its nature, have to include states and governments as the means through which

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<sup>225</sup> On the process of NGOisation of national civil societies see Alvarez, 1990 and Morris-Suzuki, 2000.

political and economic power is articulated in modern societies” (see also Callinicos, 2004 and Thekaekara, 2004).

The process conducted by the organisers of the WSF to negotiate the more radical positions against the role played by NGOs in WSF India was extremely complex. Continuous explanations to radical activists on the nature of the WSF as an open space and of the role of facilitation played by the organisers served to explain the very limited possibilities of hegemony and control that NGOs, or any other actor, could play over the WSF. However, the negotiation was made even more difficult by the same ambiguous relationships that those organising the forum had with each other. Constant, open and hidden, lack of trust and strategic opposition took place within WSF2004. Political ideology and organisational culture were battling often, especially in the last hectic months of the process over the imprint to give to WSF2004 (see next chapter). Repeated accusations of being archaic characters of a dead way of conducting politics (party and their movements' activists) or instrument of Western imperialism with a technocratic mentality (NGOs members) constituted the core of some of the harshest conflicts. Some of these conflicts will constitute the matter of Chapter 6, so in the present context I will only mention that, although praises to the ability of the actors who convened in the IGC, IWC and IOC were shared between all the participants during the evaluation period after WSF2004, yet during the meeting held in Mumbai, 28-29 February, a member of one of the most involved NGOs within the process, after offering to facilitate the organisation of the following NC in Bangalore, withdrew her help unless some other members either from a trade union or a social

movement was involved as well: she detailed her frustration for never having received recognition for the efforts put in the process whereas her belonging to a western funded NGOs was always remarked negatively.

#### **4. Hegemony in WSF2004**

The number of political conflicts affecting WSF2004 was extremely high both between and within sectors as detailed above. When those conflicts reached a dangerous level, among the several initiatives, rather uncoordinated and unstructured, a paper was circulated in the IOC list that tried to reflect on the nature of those tensions. The arguments there articulated introduce the analytical discussion of the following paragraphs:

There are also differences in perceptions regarding the way forward in terms of designating roles for political processes and movements on one hand and that of NGOs and issue based or “non-ideological” (that is not firmly rooted in specific ideologies) movements on the other. The WSF process has thrown up a dynamic in the interaction between these, and there is a certain amount of tension in this dynamic – with each feeling that the “other” is trying to hegemonise the process. Many also feel that while the broad contours of opposition to imperialist globalisation is emerging, more planning and attention should go into detailing specific alternatives to current policies and trends. (...) It is by no means a perfect process. But, perhaps, if we wait for a perfect process to be handed to us on a platter, we shall wait in vain. Let us work with the process to make it more inclusive, more equipped to confront the

challenge posed by imperialist globalisation<sup>226</sup>.

This passage defines the contours of a crucial area of conflict but it also acknowledges the role of the WSF in exposing it. That document constitutes one of the most important occasion for reflection on the nature of the WSF India and its internal conflicts. It was produced by two key actors of WSF2004 and aimed at exposing of construction of a solid and coherent alliance of civil society actors in India. The authors of that document were target of the most outraged criticisms for their authoritarian approach to hegemony building within WSF2004 and were often accused to use the WSF framework for their own political interests (Sen, 2004). That document was for sure one of the most inspiring and controversial documents produced in the framework of WSF2004<sup>227</sup>. With it, its authors try to answer some of the most recurrent criticisms voiced against the WSF. In particular they (I suggest here instrumentally) address a category of activists who are reluctant to join WSF2004 afraid of losing their revolutionary purity within the WSF space. In fact, the document refers to issues of interest to many of the actors who are already somehow part of the WSF India process but find the hegemonic practices by members of the organised left linked to the communist parties hard to tolerate.

The issues discussed in that document refer to the following issues: the difficulties to build cross-sectoral alliances in order to move beyond the condition of powerless fragmentation of the ICS; the potentialities of the WSF in producing a

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<sup>226</sup> IOC list, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2003.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

unifying process of negotiation of specificities and cultural, social and political differences; the importance of those differences in defining a successful recursive relation between the global project of the WSF and its local instantiations; the fundamental mistake of those who rather than joining this galvanising process risk instead to reduce its strengths by organising a parallel event (MR2004). To appeal to the mainly Maoist wing of the Indian activist scene, in the document the authors use a dramatic mobilising paragraph from Mao<sup>228</sup> reminding everyone that the present is a time when all progressive forces have to march along against the neoliberal enemy. It is in this context and by discussing the issues listed above that the paper spells out the real potentialities of the WSF in the Indian context<sup>229</sup>: in particular, that of bridging traditional forms of resistance with new political forms. The second section of the paper, in fact, refers to the role of traditional social movements and newer progressive organisations in the struggle against neoliberalism.

The battle of Seattle, they say, was not lead by traditional radical actors, but by moderate North American trade unions and NGOs. It is then necessary to fully understand the powerful new instruments that the global movement has been provided with by those actors, instead of simply dismiss them as instruments of a ploy to co-opt the most radical opponents of neoliberalism. In the Indian context this statement amounts to acknowledging a most fundamental shift in the political

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<sup>228</sup> "For the present upsurge of the peasant movement is a colossal event. In a very short time, in China's central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. (...) There are three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them? To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticizing? Or to stand in their way and oppose them?"

<sup>229</sup> The presence of Maoist activists also in the WSF2004 organisational process, allows us to legitimately believe that the condition of incommensurability between radical revolutionary ideologies and progressive ones has started to be negotiated.



scenario and the acceptance by activists close to the traditional left of the relevance of new actors, NGOs and new social movements, and the necessity to establish with them a political alliance. The third section of the document reassures the critics that the desire to see a wide coalition of social and political actors in India is not moved by hegemonic interests, by a specific sector of the Indian civil society, but by genuine desire to “to lend our voice to the collective, to learn from others, and also to influence others (sic!). Not with a view to hegemonise. For the WSF cannot be hegemonised by virtue of its very character”.

As earlier discussed (see chapter 4) they state here what they should instead demonstrate. Moreover, at least in practice, they should show how the WSF does not allow for hegemonic practices. In fact, the opposite is true, and their argument never convinced anyone, rather made the sophisticated Indian activist suspicious of the WSF. These contradictions and poor communicative strategies were based on the fussiness denounced in this dissertation (see chapter 4) of the concept of open space. This example, and the outcome it produced (a growing suspicion for the whole WSF exercise), illustrate the dangers created by the analytical inconsistency of the open space concept. A corollary to the statement reported above, according to which no hegemonic practices could take place within the WSF due to its very nature (the open space nature), is that it is not the WSF that creates movements for change, but it is responsibility of the movements gathering in its “open space” to create networks, alliances and platforms and to strategise together to initiate actions for change. The language of this document offers a sophisticated representation of the WSF discourse and uses it to engage the

specific Indian context and its issues.

The claims there made against hegemony and the ambiguous and contradictory use of the WSF discourse, in particular the “open space” concept, has caused numerous clashes between the actors involved in the organisation of WSF2004 and a considerable slowing down of the organisational process (see next chapter). The obvious effect those clashes generated was a sense of generalised frustration in those involved in the biggest organisational efforts, but also a lower degree of achievement than it would have been legitimate to expect of both the WSF framework and the political and strategic ability of the Indians involved in it (see chapter 7).

The constitution through the WSF of a convergent and potentially national civil society alliance in India beyond a background of fragmentation lasted for decades, highlights one of the main potentialities of the WSF: it is my contention here that the WSF can catalyse the constitution or facilitate the consolidation of counter-hegemonic fronts of CSO&Ms at local, national, transnational and potentially global civil societies. Instrumental to those processes is the recursive process of elaboration of a unitary organisational framework (the WSF) and instantiation at all levels (from local to global) of that model, which, in turn, feeds back to the process of making the common framework more and more sophisticated and usable.

WSF2004 worked at the consolidation of the Indian civil society by starting a

process of ideological and strategic negotiation among its members on the nature of the structural divisions that traverse Indian society. At the same time, whereas the fixed goal of the event has helped forcing an effective collaboration between the different components of the IOC, the stress on the event has not allowed to fully explore consistent strategies for dealing with conflicts and fragmentation on a more long-term basis. Illustration of the full recognition by the WSF2004 organisers of the limitations of their approach to difference is the debate that took place during the evaluation meeting that the IOC held in Mumbai in February 2004. The content of that debate is illuminating also in relation to previous arguments articulated in this thesis in reference to the open space and dynamics of inclusion (see chapter 4).

In that meeting, detailed references were made to issues of inclusion/exclusion, openness/closeness, with mention to concerns related to the negotiation of the personal, social and political differences of the groups and the individuals involved in the WSF process. During that meeting, one IOC member voiced in the following terms the problems faced in dealing with differences during the organisation of WSF2004: “the WSF process has suppressed differences, not created dynamics and space. It was not reconciliation but suppression of differences that made us able to organise the WSF”. Suppression of differences as hegemonic practices, took place also within the functional groups of the IOC creating “a lot of exclusions”, as maintained by a member of the Program Committee. Moreover, this situation has been magnified by the stress of organising such an event and has consequently pushed away “many valuable

people” from the WSF organising groups. The outcome was then that the mobilisation of the Indian minorities has been very weak, someone says: the mobilisation process left outside of its reach Muslim organisations, organisations of the physically challenged, of children, human right activists and many other important constituencies. This was due, as accepted by everyone, not to specific mistakes of the mobilisation committee, but to questions related to the structural peculiarities of the Indian context. On this ground, further considerations are presented by other members of the IOC. The question, for instance, of the mobilisation of religious minorities strongly conflicts, it is suggested, with the Charter according to which the WSF is a non-confessional space. This statement, however, creates important ambiguities and paradoxical situations due to the presence of a catholic father and a catholic nun at that same IOC meeting and it is not explored further. In the same discussion, someone notices that the Program Committee ensured that in the opening session of the WSF there were 3 Muslim speakers. This should give some clear message on the WSF stand on communal issues, especially considered that this key events of the WSF were the most covered by the national and international press. However, incidentally, it can be noted here that this argument does not fully satisfy Ahmed’s accusation discussed earlier – since the Muslims who were given this platform were Muslims not living in India discussing issues related to Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine (not communal politics in India), and that this was done so as not to upset the Shiv Sena lords of Mumbai (as he strongly accuses in one of his letters). The IOC members, after tabling the topic for further discussion, quickly moved on, with a symptomatic statement of the frustration generated by this question, made by one

of the leaders of the Mobilisation committee “for much that we tried the Muslims did not want to be mobilised”.

With respect to the possible actions to take in future to address these issues, some thought the IOC should be the place to reflect on these issues, but the majority took position against starting discussions that could create more fractures than reconciliation. In other words, dealing with the issue within the operative body of the WSF can only cause big fractures as to impede any further organisational commitment. Besides, said someone, the WSF job has been done and it has been done successfully: “almost all the differences” managed to work together and only in few cases the fracture was inevitable; this is unavoidable in processes of the size of the WSF. The mission of the WSF India, then, had been fulfilled. The limitations in inclusion will have to be dealt with in longer processes in the wider field of ICS rather than in the WSF<sup>230</sup>. A member of the Venue and Logistics group made a much more concrete proposal: the problem at stake is a political problem, he said: “We must realise that these sorts of problems have profound organisational implications. Differences are part of our process, the Charter of Principles clearly states that the WSF promotes differences, our task now has to be designing specific norms of functioning that help address these problems”. His suggestion then is to rethink the organisational structure of the WSF to address the problems discussed in that meeting, but also to design a regulatory framework that

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<sup>230</sup> Moreover, as clearly stated by one influential member of the Program group, “we have to realise that radical differences exist, we have to avoid, playing fairly with each other, to bring the conflicts generated by those differences into the IOC group, to avoid bigger conflicts”. “We have to accept”, he insists, “that there is no solution to some kinds of differences, and we have to learn to live with them”. Another IOC member vaguely proposes to find some system of conflict management. But the time is not enough to follow this suggestion and the proposal is left for future occasions.

facilitates engagement and inclusion of minority groups in the WSF.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed the specific instantiations of the fragmentation of the Indian civil society in the WSF India framework. I exposed the contradictions of the open space argument by discussing the conflicts exploded at the political level of WSF India and I analysed the hegemonic strategies performed by party members and their allies. I also showed how that hegemony is highly contested and resisted. I also discussed in the last section above the process of evaluation that has taken place after the Mumbai event in which the organisers fully acknowledged the major limitations of the a-political approach to difference, openness and inclusion in the WSF2004 process.

Although differences could not be easily negotiated and reasons for conflicts still persist, the start of the process of communication and engagement with each other, in a wider communicative context than the one to one dialogue, gave single issue movements, mass organisations linked to communist parties, NGOs, and grassroots organisations the chance to interact in an unprecedented way in India. This successful beginning promises to set the foundations for a more meaningful collaboration in the future both within the WSF context and in alternative configurations of ICS. The broader space provided by the WSF allowed the triangulation of many conflicts through the WSF global framework (IS, IC, BOC, like in the case of the Dalit leader discussed above) (see Keck and Sikkink, 1998

and Khagram et al. 2002) or through transnational alliances to which Indian activist could refer to sustain their demands against marginalisation and for inclusion, configuring a potentially global system of accountability for the WSF leadership (as in the case of some feminists activists). The conflicts that hit the organisational framework of WSF2004 helped Indian organisations to elaborate new ways of dealing with old issues and this moved often times debates from stall positions to dynamic, yet conflictual and contested grounds, as it happened with organisational architecture, funding policy, vision, mission and tactical understanding of radical social change. On the basis of what observed in this exploration, it is legitimate to expect a further dynamic process of consolidation of the WSF process in India. Those described above were some of the most important political and strategic conflicts that took place in the process that lead to WSF2004. In what follows I discuss how those crucial political conflicts were translated into conflicts within the administrative/managerial framework of the Mumbai office.

## **Chapter 6: The WSF office in Mumbai**

In the previous chapter I discussed hegemony and resistance at the political level of the WSF2004 process. Here I extend that analysis to the administrative level. The two levels of course are not seen here as fully separated. In fact, as it will become soon clear, the boundaries between the two levels were not always well defined and they constantly influenced and shaped each other. This Chapter shows how the correspondence between discourse, practice and organisational set up (Burawoy, 2000) is not evident and often contradictory in WSF2004. In the Mumbai office the claims of openness of the WSF framework were not always matched in the daily practice. This gap was generated and later exacerbated by the consistent denial by many of the key WSF2004 leaders of the relevance of dynamics such as “hegemony”, “leadership”, “power” as shown in the previous chapter.

Between October and January the stress caused by the approaching event exacerbated the conflicts in the Mumbai office and within the wider organisational structure. This chapter focuses on the way in which those conflicts were negotiated. One of the strongest claims made by the WSF activists repeatedly, including in the Charter, is that the WSF can provide GCS with tools to negotiate differences and conflicts in a peaceful and productive way. If those claims were true (and the applicability of those instruments extendible to society as a whole) we should be able to find sophisticated mechanisms of a) dispute and



conflict prevention, negotiation and resolution, b) institutional design in order to configure the WSF to fully express the aspiration to another world without hierarchies and domination, c) knowledge and information production and distribution that are fully inclusive, d) resource mobilisation and allocation in ways that extol autonomy and freedom from the control of the market place and e) instruments to translate conflict resolution within the organisation to society as a whole. These are the claims I test in the following pages.

It is my contention that practices aiming at transforming conflict management into a technical exercise are destined to reproduce logics against which the WSF is organising. The de-politicisation of conflicts within WSF2004 shows how these practices risk obliterating any meaningful contribution by the WSF framework to both ICS and GCS.

In this chapter I claim that horizontal organisational structures can be very successful in facilitating conflict resolution, but horizontality is not, as many think in the WSF, lack of organisational structure, but the enforcement of a specific structure that performs openness and inclusiveness. However, openness cannot be simply stated: this attitude hides systemic closeness and structural and political marginalisation. Conflicts are not exorcised by stating that the WSF space is devoid of power dynamics (see chapter 4). I claim instead that conflicts are not to be avoided; they express the creative energy of civil society (Gramsci, 1971). However, the political nature of those conflicts needs to be promptly exposed to avoid the conflicts from degenerating and extending to other sectors of the

organisation, as observed in the case discussed in this chapter. In organisations such as the WSF, the understanding of the inherent political nature of conflicts needs to be followed by the design of guidelines and process rules to avoid dysfunctional conflicts and the continuous regressing to positions already dealt with previously (vicious cycles). When no rules are set, powerful actors take advantage of their position and impose their hegemony. Moreover, structures design is necessary to set up any organisational space, in order to avoid reproducing unbalanced power dynamics. Accountability and transparency can only be provided by consistent institutional frameworks. Claiming to build an organisation where interests and power are neither sought for nor contested is at best naïve, and at worst disingenuous. This chapter is structured as follows. The first section deals with the nature and potentialities of conflict in organisations. I then discuss at length the case study and the stage in which it was set. Following that I analyse the implications of what I observed. Finally I reflect on how the office conflicts over information management resonated in the broader organisational and political spaces causing the exasperation and explosion of the conflicts described in the previous chapter over leadership and hegemony in WSF2004 between left activists and NGO members.

## **1. On conflict**

From the moment I entered the Mumbai WSF office, I was struck by the level of tension and unhappiness that pervaded it. I started asking to those I was working with what were the reasons for so much tension and through their answers I

started building a complex picture of the power dynamics at play in WSF2004 and the confrontations they generated. The possibility to resolve those conflicts, rather than simply manage them, was denied unanimously by all those I interviewed. The motivations were different: they often referred to the contingent and transient nature of WSF India, with its only goal of organising the January event. Others referred to the impossibility to resolve what they called “personality clashes” between the leaders of the Mumbai office. I argue that those conflicts hid political issues rather than an alleged incommensurability of personalities.

The conflicts that often risked tearing apart the Mumbai office were determined by the relative positions in the Indian political scenario held by the actors involved. In case analysed here the main conflict was between left and NGO activists. This conflict reproduced the tensions recorded in the wider ICS as discussed earlier (chapter 2 and 5). Its consequences risked to jeopardise the success of WSF2004. Exasperation often loomed on the atmosphere of the office, and a pernicious lack of trust resulted as a consequence, which in turn made collaborative and team work more and more difficult. The most striking consequences of those conflicts were a substantial waste of fundamental resources (human and physical), a much lower quality of the work produced, and the failure to implement an effective institutional learning process to improve the WSF India process. These outcomes, though, are not inevitable and can be reverted, need that a more sophisticated approach to conflict is elaborated in the WSF. Organisations are inherently conflictual (Gellner and Hirsh, 2001; Wright, 1994) just as society is (Turner, 1974 and 1982). In conditions of stress, organisations are especially

subject to conflicts as observed in WSF2004 in the months before the event. If these are dealt with appropriately they can result in considerable institutional and organisational development. To fully appreciate the characteristics of conflicts they have to be analysed within the broader organisational framework, rather than isolated from it, and in direct relationships with leadership styles (chapter 5), the organisation's system of values, its mission and vision (chapter 2).

In order to fully appreciate the implications and consequences of conflict is necessary to assess who are the parties involved, what are their specific interests and their benefits or losses in case of continuation or resolution of the conflicts analysed. An accurate review of the origins and roots of the conflict will further detail its nature, consequences and possible ways of resolution. It is crucial also to assess if the organisation has a clear understanding of its position, its potentialities and its goals, if these have been negotiated and established in participation with all the organisation's members, if both values and goals are shared by those who perform the organisation's activities. It is crucial to establish if the conflicts under scrutiny are around resources (money, assets, space) or if they involve human and social needs for recognition, status or personal development (Fraser, 1995 and 2000).

Organisational structures need to be carefully scrutinised in order to assess if departments are in competition with each other or if cooperation is hindered by specific individuals. It is crucial to establish if departments tend to "imperialist dynamics" (as often denounced of Finance in WSF2004) and if the

communication (formal and informal) between different sections of the organisation is fluid and allows everybody to know what the other departments are doing and how what they do affects their work. Accurately assessing power imbalances and dynamics between individuals and groups sheds considerable light on what contributes to conflict.

Through the study of all the above it should become clear if we are observing a functional or dysfunctional, progressive or regressive conflict (functional conflict are those that add to the organisation performance whereas dysfunctional conflicts detract from those performances) (see Amason, 1996; Amason and Schweiger, 1994; Amason et al., 1995). If the shared need in an organisation seems to be to immediately put an end to conflicts, this approach however is often motivated by a limited understanding of the creativity of conflicts. Appropriate conflict management systems should avoid or limit the incidence of dysfunctional conflicts and at the same time allow functional conflict to play their constructive role.

Beyond mechanistic approaches to organisations, systematic approaches to conflict (Costantino and Merchant, 1996; Slaikou and Hasson, 1998) allow us to consider all aspects of organisational architecture and processes, individuals and their roles but also their attitudes, beliefs and values, rules and daily practices, values and goal and the physical environment as all integrated and contributing to the investigation of conflicts and the devising of correspondent integrated systems to deal with and take full advantage of conflicts. When looking at organisations in

these terms, looking at the patterns of interactions between those factors, rather than the single factors in themselves, are what really matters in studying the way those systems work in constantly reinforcing recurrent feedback interactions. Conflict management should be thought in the same terms: not as an add-on structure (again a mechanistic approach) that deals with specific situations but as a specific way in which the parts of the system interact taking advantage of functional conflicts and quickly dealing with dysfunctional ones. So, in practice, formal interest based solutions like mediation (only informally played in WSF2004) and rights based, “legal”, ones like arbitration (never really attempted but often threatened by some and ridiculed by others: another field of contention for left and NGO activists) should be present alongside each other and both together with informal processes of complaints and assistance.

## **2. The scene**

The office was divided into 6 open space cubicles, a separate room that later became the finance office, a separate meeting room and a big hall around which all the cubicles and the meeting room were located and in which meetings took place and the whole of the “social life” of the office was performed. At the back of the office were located the facilities and the kitchen where the cook and her family worked to take care of the dozens of workers, volunteers, and guests of the office. The cubicles hosted six of the eight functional groups (Liaison had no office space in Mumbai, Programme was in Delhi) and the administrative and support staff. The population of the office was extremely varied. IOC members,

full-time staff, volunteers, both from India and abroad, office clerks, and a whole host of visitors, journalists, researchers. Towards the end of the organisational process, around 50 people were working regularly on the organisation of the Mumbai events. In the long evenings the office was populated by dozens more people, coming in for meetings or to exchange political opinions with organisers and volunteers.

When I made my entry in the office, in early October, the office was taking still shape. I soon started asking around about the reason of the already heavy tension. Many<sup>231</sup> answered that the reason was the website, others said because of the intolerable behaviour of the finance department, others mentioned the incredibly poor work of M&C (from which the website depended), others still mentioned the chaotic organisation of the office, the lack of fixed roles and responsibilities, the lack of leadership, transparency and accountability which caused wasted time and resources and no achievement in the organisational tasks. In a long emotional interview one of the organisers told me about her distress at seeing how gender issues were the most remote from the consideration of the activists in WSF2004 and how “respect” was expected by the majority of the male activists, especially if elderly. In the context of the youth camp, many<sup>232</sup> told me of the stress of being always considered as kids and never fully respected as activists (it is interesting to note that the coordination group of the IYC was composed by members whose aged varied between 25 and 36). Another long interview with a female foreign volunteer added to the picture a distinct feeling of distress about the behaviour of

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<sup>231</sup> My main informants at this stage were members of the staff and volunteers.

<sup>232</sup> Two interviews were crucial in this sense: the first with a European volunteer and the second with an Indian member of the Youth Organising Committee working on gender issues.

the office coordinators and IOC members towards foreign volunteers. After few days from my arrival the picture was so dismal that I started thinking that all the accusations were symptoms of a general malaise rather than only specific problems in themselves. It was likely, as observed before with reference to other WSF contexts (see chapter 5) that generic sexist behaviour was persistent even within that context, that younger activists were considered less experienced and therefore bullied and patronised, and that underlying racism and cultural domination were latent in the Mumbai office. However, it became soon clear to me that the complexity of the conflicts and the amount of accusations had to do with profound organisational mistakes that inevitably amplified cultural, human, social and political differences and contrasting interests instead of allowing them to express the fundamental creative energy discussed above.

I decided, then, to understand where the organisational problems were mostly located, to follow the indications that came out of my first interviews with the members of the office. The website seemed to be the core of the issue. But it could also have been a pretext for confrontation that would have lead me to the roots of the conflicts I was witnessing. Moreover, due to the choice to use free software (FS) in every aspect of the information system of WSF2004 made of this aspect a very crucial one with respect to knowledge production and distribution, a topic I was very keen to investigate further. In what follows I discuss some of the conflicts related to the design and maintenance of the website and the politics of the use of FS in WSF2004.



By analysing in detail the vicissitudes of the website and the work dynamics in the office, I highlight how a common feature acted in those domains causing major shortcomings in the way FS, and by extension the values and vision of the WSF, were understood. What was often described as a misunderstanding on nature and political relevance of the operating system adopted in the office was, instead, the clash of multiple contrasting political interests. The conflicts that followed, I maintain here, were due to social and political issues rather than technical ones as claimed by some IOC members<sup>233</sup>) according to whom these indicated either inappropriate technical choices made by individuals or general faults of the equipment. How were these conflicts generated? I suggest that the most crucial issue was related to the clashes between the perceptions that organizers, users and FS activists had of the role of FS in the struggles for rights (both political and economic), democracy and global citizenship and their understanding of the necessity of a daily implementation of FS at the organisational level and its political implications. Those clashes expressed the creative energy of the interaction between actors across borders<sup>234</sup>. Those actors were IWC and IOC members (decision-makers and implementers), the management of the office, the users of the FS, the FS activists. The differences can be summarised as follows: for IWC and IOC members the information management software used was only marginally of interest. Some understood it as a way to claim self-reliance against software mega-corporations but they preferred to think of it as a technical issue. For the left activists committed to the office management was a strategic way to state their understanding of the WSF principles and to link their choices to the

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<sup>233</sup> Informal interviews in the months of November with two IOC members.

<sup>234</sup> See Rosaldo cited in Alvarez, R. 1995; and Turner 1974 and 1982..

claims of activists across the globe (in previous WSF events it was often noted by media activists that the use of proprietary software was inconsistent with the values of the WSF). For other members of the coordination group instead, focusing on such minor details when the real issue was the delivery of the biggest platform of civil society ever realised in India, was risky and inconsiderate. The same perception was shared by many volunteers and members of staff of the office who simply did not understand why so much energy needed to be wasted in learning new software and in constant tweaking of an unstable system. The activists of the FS movements (members of the FS Foundation India) did not have the chance to provide the necessary orientation to those using the software and to explain to them the real potentialities and its political value. The interaction between activists and users was patchy and left to the dictates of contingency, time, and personal sympathy. The consequence was an increasing frustration from both sides and rare occasions of dialogue.

The website was a major locus of contention for both political and technical reasons. I will state at the outset that it proved a poorly designed strategy to entrust the development of the website to a company that had no experience in developing websites using FS. A politically aware implementation and use of FS should have considered with more care the implications of such choice, in particular the de-politicisation of the approach to knowledge and information. The relationship with the company in charge of the website was tumultuous since early in the process. Notwithstanding the poor quality of the service provided by the same company during ASF2003 and the conflicts generated in that context, and

notwithstanding the decision taken in a meeting held in Mumbai in July to discontinue the arrangement for the Website with IntSys (fictitious name). That arrangement was finally confirmed due to political pressures by the M&C group and reassurances of reliability by consultants appointed by that group. This decision produced tensions that escalated into fierce conflict with accusations of corruption and ineptitude, bullying, and personal political interests from both sides competing<sup>235</sup>. The next few paragraphs illustrate the actual technical performance of the website.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2003 in an email to the IOC list, with special attention to M&C, a member noted that “the website has been down for three days, when will it be up again?” On the 20<sup>th</sup> of August the Delhi office sent an email to the IOC providing a thorough assessment of the website. Not much is working and many documents provided to IntSys for upload are yet not online. On the 29<sup>th</sup> another IOC member wrote that she has tried for three days, to “have a look at the events registered, but [the website] was not accessible at all”. On the 1<sup>st</sup> October the Delhi office sent to all IOC members the following instructions: “Please find attached the event registration form. Fill it up and send it to us by post”. But the website received not only internal criticisms; on 10<sup>th</sup> October M&C received the following email: “please forward detail as to the venue and registration and accommodation formalities plus costs for both Indians and foreigners! Getting into and finding anything on your site is not easy!” The most relevant information

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<sup>235</sup> I asked to an IOC member his interpretation of the furious conflict between M&C and Finance. He replied that it was because of the website: “Finance knows how the company is close to the consultant who has been put in charge of the website by M&C, who at the same time is considered responsible for the choice of the FS solution”.

were not accessible on the website, but it was also not easy “getting into” the website that was most of the time down for maintenance. As a consequence the problems with the website escalated into problems of access and openness of the WSF2004 space of which its website was meant to be the gateway. Again, a seemingly technical problem pointed to deeper political issues.

Who, then, was in charge? Who was to blame if these dysfunctions were not fixed? Towards the end of October the responsibilities for the website were once again re-assigned. An IOC member close to the Finance group took charge of the relation with the company, while the responsibility for the content of the website remained with M&C. Something else was happening in those days. The server was going to be transferred to a more powerful installation. This process was creating further frustrations. From Delhi the members of the Programme Group (PG) voiced their frustration for a decision that risked compromising the registration of activities for the event that was in those days in its most crucial phase. Their frustration was also increased by their ignorance of the process through which that decision was taken and their inability to influence it in anyway. So, not only ordinary members were not sure about who was in charge of what, but also the Delhi office had no idea of what was happening in Mumbai.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> October, an IOC member directly accused M&C that “there are some urgent issues regarding the website that need to be discussed in your group and decision taken very urgently. Right now M&C seems to have washed its hands of the website (...) the site is always out of date”. The situation reached a state that

seemed to require the intervention of a specialist external to the IOC. On 25<sup>th</sup> October two members of the Mumbai group asked an independent consultant to provide his professional advice. The tasks will be divided in the following way: "The content and general website responsibility will still be part of M&C. V&L will have to cooperate with [the consultant] and give him all the help he needs. Also Finance." Everything seemed clear in the minds of the IOC members: the website was showing technical problems and only an external IT professional could solve them. All the involved functional groups of the WSF process must cooperate with him. The whole process will take one week and it will solve the conflict that is causing so much distress in the office and inefficiency in WSF2004 (by then already the topic of widespread international criticism).

Due to the need to deliver, the international pressure, and the need to make the office a productive work environment amid so much tension and stress induced attitudes and behaviours not to be expected in a WSF setting, many in the Mumbai office were getting impatient and forgetting the fundamental values on which the WSF was built. According to many who I interviewed during those days, it was high time that the IOC forgot the whole story of open space and FS and gave space to professionals and business oriented people who could deal with other business oriented people (the manager of IntSys) and solve the problems that were affecting the process in Mumbai.

Accountability, transparency, responsibility and efficiency: these were the main issues affecting the website and many other sectors of WSF2004. On the basis of

the agreement negotiated with some IOC members, the consultant started his job with energy and good spirit. However, he soon realized that things were different from what he expected. On 27<sup>th</sup> October he sent an email to the IOC in which he described what he found. "I have not as yet to date seen such gross negligence in a system. (...) Given the date of the conference and the date today, as well as the arrogance in the face of absolute incompetence, as displayed by IntSys and related entities, is a cause of grave concern." What he meant by 'related entities' will become clear in a following email reported below. What seemed to be a trivial problem threatened instead to jeopardize the entire event. The technical explanation did not convince him any more. After few more days into the process he finally decided to declare all his findings. On 31<sup>st</sup> October he sent his '*J'accuse*'. This letter finally exposed the level of conflict generated in the Mumbai office, and the issues that would detonate such apparently irreconcilable conflicts. He stated that

the work (...) has been completed (...) in 6 working days, despite lacunae severe enough to initiate civil and criminal prosecution (...) What are you there for? Who is accountable? Most importantly, is any one of you competent or even trivially qualified, given the total absence of any professionalism, crony corruption and the least of it is plain incompetency in any manner whatsoever to undertake a task of this magnitude? (...) The staff there is working under absurd conditions! (...) What is the total travel and ALL related expenditure of all the key personnel? (...) BEFORE any OTHER disaster of this magnitude happens – and there are at least several dozen possibilities. Choose one – Perhaps a STAMPEDE. (...). If this is not done ("it's too late", "you find me another person", "it's the process" and yes of course lets move him/her to another committee, split up the committee and such other balderdash are nonsense. J' ACCUSE.

The consultant's intervention proved almost irrelevant<sup>236</sup>: problems with server and website were continuous. Finally the server was moved on the weekend between 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> December. This painful operation did not substantially improve the performance of the website. In the evaluation meeting held in Mumbai on 28-29 February, a member of V&L in her report provided a clear picture of the extent to which the unreliability of the website caused major dysfunctions. She focused on the effects on the accommodation part of the website.

Wrong calculation of monies to be sent by delegates for booking of room/rooms; duplication of ID numbers; missing data; receiving of blank forms after input from various individuals from across the world; mess up in data transfer: part of the data sent without any prior intimation to original website (...); Double code on accommodation because of which while other sites received information/emails, accommodation did not; Back end of exhibition stalls was a big mess. The stalls were not even numbered sequentially. After several attempts at persuading IntSys to do the needful it was decided that the data be manually handled. (...) That the website did not crash and the Media Centre worked was a result of WSF efforts under the supervision (...) of FSF (...). Their commitment and hard work enabled the 'bugged' website to remain functional despite the consistent recurrence of many avoidable problems and the presence of IntSys.

From the political point of view, the choice of the specific company that was in charge of the development of the website was consistently criticized. It would have been wiser, it was maintained by many members of the IOC<sup>237</sup>, either to

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<sup>236</sup> Only one email is sent in reply to IOC list by a member who wonders what is the consultant talking about, and alleging that "something rotten smells in Mumbai". All the others must know what the consultant is talking about.

<sup>237</sup> I discussed extensively this subject with many of the actors involved: IOC members, users of the website, developers and volunteers.

choose a more professional company committed to FS or to have the staff working on the website in the WSF office with the competent supervision of the members of the FS Foundation. This would have allowed the publication in real time of all material needed, better content management with a consistent amount of information readily available in the website for the hundreds of thousands of users around the world, it would have also allowed multilingual translation of the content that was mainly in English and, moreover, this arrangement would have avoided furious political fights within the IOC and would have built on the previous experience of the ASF where the same problems were faced. In other words a political commitment to the values of the WSF would have ensured better information production and distribution and therefore more openness, and inclusiveness.

When the “severe lacunae” of the website became publicly visible it was impossible to stop the vicious cycle generated by the recursive pattern of technical and political causes and effects. Until the end, the problems of the website were dealt with in severely flawed ways, based on contingency and improvisation, by all parties involved. This generated a deployment of material and human resources not consistent with the WSF values. Moreover, severe political and technical misjudgements generated grave deterioration of personal relations and produced an atmosphere of suspicion that undermined the possibility of having a fully efficient website and a healthy work environment.

Few days after the consultant’s email, one of the coordinators of the Finance



group resigned stating that his decision was due to the lack of accountability for what concerned the website. From this moment on, the decision not to tackle with strong commitment the serious malfunctioning of the website and the already aggravating situation in the Mumbai office made the two explode at the same time by exposing the intertwined nature of those confrontations and their direct link with the system of information management chosen by the WSF 2004. Technical and political issues converged to create one greater problem that shook the very foundations of the WSF in Mumbai, and how, at the same time, the crisis represented a fully creative moment. However, the distress caused by these recurring crises could have been reduced or, in fact, productively oriented, if a set of collectively negotiated guidelines had been defined and periodically renegotiated by all members involved in the running of the WSF office. I here mean a Charter or organisational Principles that applies the values of the Charter to the administrative setup of the local OCs<sup>238</sup>.

### **3. The Open Office**

The office of the WSF in Mumbai was an exciting experiment in physical openness. The external doors and those of the different departments were always open. From the organisational point of view it did not have a very clear hierarchical structure<sup>239</sup> or specific people to refer to for task distribution or

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<sup>238</sup> As an outcome of some shortcomings of WSF2007, such a Charter has become the focus of the work of a commission of the IC setup at the IC meeting after the Nairobi event.

<sup>239</sup> However, there was a vertical separation between political and operational tasks and actors coordinating those tasks. Power struggles were evident at all levels of this hierarchy: at the political, managerial and administrative level. There was also a clear imbalance of power

reporting of work done, but very loose coordination and that, as well, changing constantly. Late afternoons the atmosphere was surreal with an average of 50 or 60 people in the vast central meeting area and in the slightly more demarcated office space doing anything from socializing to informal politics to 'normal' office tasks. In relation to the main case study discussed in this chapter, in the office there were at the highest peak of the workload, 37 computers running GNU/Linux. Three people of FSF India were in charge of administering the system. The same people were handling the servers; two of them were contributing to the publication of the website. A Czech volunteer joined later to contribute his valuable programming skills.

The openness of the office and the FS were meant to give those involved in the organisation of WSF2004 a glance of what 'another world' could look like. A 'horizontal' world with no hierarchies where the coordination of the work was done collectively and the implementation was orchestrated by all actors involved; a world where social borders were permeable and continuously crossed generating complex processes of creative hybridisation; a world where the borders between work and leisure, efficiency and creativity, responsibility and recognition, were not strictly drawn. In other words, the organisational headquarters of the WSF, in India as elsewhere, were expected to show in practice the viability of the WSF vision and the effectiveness of the instruments it had devised to achieve that

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between those who were in charge of the system and those who operated it. But other issues also became evident. The disillusion on the open office that was shaking staff members and volunteers alike, made them realize that other positions were subject to a hierarchical articulation. A vast number of young boys were employed to put registration forms into envelopes: these boys rarely interacted with the office staff. Two office runners took care of all minion tasks. The cook and her family spent their time in the kitchen and rarely spoke to the others.

vision. As for the case of previous WSF events (Albert, 2003; Waterman, 2003c), the WSF office in Mumbai fell short of its ambitious plan on several accounts.

The Mumbai office gave a clear idea of what should not happen in a free world as I illustrate here with respect to the case of conflicts generated by the information management system. A series of shortcomings were due to inexperience, improvisation at the organisational and coordination levels, lack of thorough consideration of the political aspects involved in the management of an open office and in the use of FS. This open process, which was experimented in Mumbai, came with almost no documentation attached. The management of the system caused slowness and innumerable sudden halts to the work. Most important of all: GNU/Linux was a new system for almost everyone in the office. No consistent training was provided to show its potentialities and only one presentation was given by the president of the FSF India to the staff of the office. All interventions of the technicians of the FSF were contingent and related to troubleshooting. This never solved the dynamics of dependence between users and technical staff<sup>240</sup>. At the origin of the mistakes mentioned were the lack of coordination at the level of system design and realization, the miscalculation of the relevance of the software in the daily routine of an office, and the fundamental misjudgement made at office coordination level (and at the IOC level) to consider

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<sup>240</sup> From an interview with a staff member: "I got used to the basic Linux features pretty soon...the only problems that I always faced was with the printer. In fact, everyone in the office seemed to be having the same problems, and at that time all the technical help that we had gave some technical explanation which I could never understand...solved the problem in a jiffy only to have it messed up again in half an hour. At that time I thought it was because Linux is new...plus these guys must be recently trained in it...but they have not been trained to communicate with the user. Their attitude always gave the vibes that the problem was too small to bother them and that we were a dumb lot to solve it ourselves. The natural reaction was that the staff shifted from being polite and understanding to rude and bullying the technical help".

the design and management of the system a technical issue.

When there was the chance to discuss all these issues, there were strong objections to discuss the GNU/Linux related problems that were put forward at the IOC meeting in November. That meeting could have been an important moment to try and address both politically and technically the problems related to office and website management avoiding many future problems. The opportunity was missed due to the proactive willingness to avoid dealing with uncontrollable conflicts and, on the other side, due to the ignorance of the majority of those present at that meeting of the political relevance of the issues at stake. In other words, the IOC knew of the underlying political conflict taking place in the office: it simply was the same that was affecting the IOC itself and the whole ICS. As in other occasions it deliberately decided not to engage. In particular, not many, if anyone, wanted to risk a serious political challenge on the kind of software to be used in WSF2004. In the following weeks things continued to be dealt with on an emergency basis with deeply negative consequences that were aggravated day after day rather than being solved. Moreover, the accusations voiced by the IT consultant provoked a sudden worsening in the relationships, already tense, between coordinators of groups, coordinators of the office, staff and volunteers.

On the 7th of November, one of the coordinators of Finance resigned. His resignations shook the process. These were difficult weeks of the process in Mumbai. The stress was growing day after day, the differences between actors became more and more obvious and some dysfunctions were simply too important

not to force people to take position. The IT consultant denounced racketeering, corruption, incompetence, lack of accountability, lack of democratic practices, political struggles, hierarchies not exposed: the WSF office seemed to be the place where all the issues that the WSF was fighting against were concentrated. These are the most important extracts from the resignations letter:

My resignation is to do with the continuous, perpetual incompetence of some IOC members in Mumbai and protection of it by lobbying, manipulation etc by some other ioc members. (...) I want to state here that it is [...]’s unaccountable, arrogant and boastful ways, unfortunately protected by some IOC members who has contributed to a large extent for the present mess in the office, website and communication group crisis. (...) This applies to issues raised by [the consultant] too. Are we willing to fix responsibility and hold each other accountable or we close our ranks to protect falsehood is the question that “we the dreamers of another world” need to answer.

A member of the Delhi office writes a long email that reflects on the deep problems within the WSF process, that this crisis exposed.

If we insist upon a pluralist and inclusive culture in the WSF, there is a price all of us have to pay for it. (...) The WSF was not meant to be a “project” or an “event”. It was meant to be something much beyond that -- a vision, a dream. You can opt out of a project, but can you opt out of a vision? (...) First, we are aware that in a process such as the WSF nobody is indispensable, but the participation of everybody is critical - even crucial. (...) Third, (...) do we need to allow things to reach crisis proportions before we react by taking precipitate actions and inflexible positions? (...) I am aware that all differences that we have within us do not relate to the WSF office. But it is also true that the flash point in these differences at the moment appears to be the office and its functioning.

It was in moments of crisis like this one that the most important reflections over the sense of the WSF struggle were made. Crises could end up destroying the WSF India, but processes are also made stronger by crises. The letter reported above is one of the most important documents produced during those days and clearly defines the complex framework of the WSF process in India. This will not be the end of the negotiations opened up by the crisis generated by the conflicts over the website, but it started an open and deep process of conflict resolution that lasted a full week. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November the exhortations of many IOC members made the main actor involved in the crisis withdraw his resignations and reporting back on the meeting that the Mumbai based IOC members had that morning. At that meeting many important dynamics took place and the meeting was completely different from every other. For the first and only time there was a call to have a closed meeting. The motivations were reported in the minutes: "Since this meeting would discuss the resignation of one of the IOC members it would be confined only to IOC members". Along with the resignations other crucial issues were discussed in that meeting. I briefly report them because they expose further inconsistencies between the WSF values and their instantiation in the Mumbai office.

The first point discussed in the meeting referred to "some complaint regarding the content and wording of communication that goes out of the WSF mailbox". It was therefore proposed that in future when office staff responds to emails a copy should automatically be marked to a member of the Delhi office so that some amount of monitoring can be carried out. Moreover, "some guideline on protocol

when receiving phone calls should also be laid out for the office staff'. The discussion then escalated further: "it was felt that although the staff should have certain autonomy in office functioning that does not preclude office discipline. Members decided that when the steering group on office functioning meets it should also draft guidelines of functioning of office staff including disciplinary issues". Control of the office staff behaviour, guidelines on protocol and policing of the actions of "the staff" were claimed by many. These attitudes towards organisational culture are highly inconsistent with a culture of openness and horizontality such that envisioned by the WSF. That vision demands a democratic, participatory and transparent process through which all those conditions (protocol, discipline, etc.) would be negotiated by all those involved and affected by those decisions rather than imposed in a top-down manner by the "leadership" onto "the staff". After exhausting the current item of the agenda the following was tackled: the website<sup>241</sup>.

The reasons for the resignations of the IOC member and Finance coordinator were thus reported in the minutes: "he pointed out that he had three reasons for his resignations, namely, problems with office functioning, website and M&C". A full restructuring of the office took place during that meeting, with many new people getting involved, and others changing roles. The overall changes in the structure of the office involved the relations between coordinators of the office and coordinators of the FGs and their new tasks in the office. All this restructuring

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<sup>241</sup> From the Meeting minutes: "[the IT consultant]'s evaluation of the website was that it was professionally poorly designed with several structural problems. In addition to limitations in software design the hardware inputs of the website were also too low for the load we were carrying. (...) It was decided to invite Dr. Nagarjuna (...) to advise us."

was meant to reformulate the conflict between Finance and M&C. However, one of the coordinators of the M&C group makes clear that "he has been involved in running the office from May onwards and he would continue in that capacity although he would work with the team of IOC members who had offered to devote time in the office".

Although an important chapter of the WSF process closed with that meeting, it was obvious to everyone that those conflicts would reappear at the next opportunity. However, I suggest here, it is also likely that this continuous negotiation process, as also maintained by some in their attempts to make the IOC member withdraw his resignations, will build with time a net of trust that will help move beyond the present crises, perhaps toward other and creative crises along the path of the WSF India journey. The consultant's accusations about the treatment to the staff have not been solved or not even negotiated during that process. In fact, the opposite was true: disciplinary and control measures were discussed and decided. This opened a deep fracture in the office dynamics between the next group of coordinators and the staff. The staff resented the exclusion from the meeting, and resented even more the reference to disciplinary codes. This inevitably lead to the explosion of a new front in the office conflicts between the Finance department and the office staff (more or less openly backed by the former adversaries). The accusations voiced at the meeting discussed above about the staff's undisciplined behaviour translated, few weeks after, into an official letter sent by one of the coordinators of the office to a staff member. In that letter the staff member's behaviour was described as unprofessional, not nice



and impolite. In that letter the office coordinator asked for a written reply for the same day in response to the letter from one of the auditors. In that letter it was mentioned that an office staff demonstrated a strong bias towards one of the contractors. According to some of those in charge of the office management, the staff member in question had favoured the unprofessional conduct of one of the computer suppliers and obstructed the office disciplinary intervention against the contractor by supposedly hiding evidences and unnecessarily slowing down the monitoring process of the performance of that contractor. Moreover, to the repeated inquires by members of the WSF she responded rudely. The letter provocatively asked the staff: "whose side are you on?" The response to that letter was a joint staff action against the coordination of the office. On the 9th of December a petition was circulated to stop the "systematic harassment" against the member of staff. The text of the petition letter deserves thorough attention because it exposed some fundamental issues regarding the politics of the workplace in Mumbai:

The real responsibility of dealing with issues concerning the entire office has been lost in the midst of the continuous jugglery of the responsibility for office functioning. (...) we need clarification on the following: a) who is being appointed, b) how have they being appointed, c) what is the scope of their work. (...) It is only because of our strong belief in what the WSF stands for that the staff has never resorted to expressing concerns in such an explicit manner. However, it is evident that this sort of harassment that we undergo is contrary to all the principles of the WSF. We demand an immediate stop of the systematic harassment and also an explanation for the above. In absence of an immediate and appropriate response, we would be forced to take up the employment practices of the WSF 2004 with the entire IGC, IWC, IOC, BOC, IC and the funders of the WSF 2004.

The letter here reported was drafted in close collaboration between the office staff and members of the M&C group. The language of the above reported passage fully reflects the main issues of the confrontation that took place between left and NGO activists at the crucial meeting regarding the IOC resignations. This new front is therefore but one more feature of the main conflict that traversed the Mumbai office. A conflict that, as often times mentioned, was originated by political differences between the two opponents and involved issues of financial resources management. It was fuelled by the lack of clear rules of conduct and a consistent organisational structure and exploded taking the shape of a personality clash between two actors aiming at conquering the sole leadership of the Mumbai office.

After signing the petition all staff members and volunteer took part in a meeting with the coordinator of the office on the 10th of December. The main issue highlighted was that of personal accountability. IOC had severe difficulties in allocating resources and individuals to the right place. The office coordinator at the centre of this conflict, stated that this is "part of the process". Appointments were made by raising hands in meetings and have nothing to do with personal skills for specific tasks. But, according to him, the question of the office was different: in this case management in the office and accountability were tackled in a much more serious way, and in what he called "a much more professional manner". He illustrated an argument about a clear distinction between the office (the operational department) and the political organisation, the IOC, in this

showing an approach to politics and management that opposed them to each other, while privileging the latter as the space where things “got done”<sup>242</sup>. The meeting was relatively successful and the main issues were resolved. But other fractures started to take place in the office as a consequence of the new divisions of roles and responsibilities decided few weeks earlier.

On the 13th of December some of the members of the staff had, over lunch, an interesting conversation about the people who were in charge of fixing the technical aspects of the office information system. Many felt that they could keep the staff on their toes because they could fix the computers. No one understood anything of what they did when they pretended they were repairing something and they, when asked, explained things in a very cursory way and with an incredible show of technical terms obscure to almost everyone. The machines were not working properly; the system was being redesigned in those days (the servers were shifted the previous weekend). The feeling of frustration was high, the new efficiency, business-like, professional approach started creating problems the most crucial of which was precisely the pressure put on the technical staff to perform. To this pressure they responded with a highly complex strategy of foot dragging on one side and an incredible show off of technical knowledge on the other side. No one was able in the office to engage such flow of jargon, let alone assess its validity. The feelings generated by this behaviour added up to those caused by the

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<sup>242</sup> In several critical moments during the organisational process of WSF2004, arguments of this kind have been brought forward by different actors. The broad implication was always that politics has to be stopped at some point from interfering with the implementation of its decisions. Other times, as in the case here mentioned, a more substantial distrust for politics made some burst into expression of full understanding of the reason why neoliberalism is so successful at the planetary level: “because it gets things done” (interview with an IOC member).

other conflicts between staff and management, between the different people involved in the management of the office and between them and the IOC. The tension reached unbearable proportions in the office.

The 18th of December all the main functions of the website were still down and the email accounts didn't work yet. The staff wandered in the office, trying to do their best to fulfil their tasks, the technicians looked engrossed in their work trying hard to do something. Everyone mentioned the director of FSF India like the saviour, and waited for him to come to solve all the problems created by the office information system. Some general considerations were made on the relative power that technical people had in the office. However, not much could be discussed around this topic: whenever this conversation started everyone realized that this could create problems for at least one of the techies: he was a friend of most of the staff, his position was not easy, he was young, and he did not deserve more problems than he had. The other IT technicians saw this as a sleight of hand to quieten the office staff resentment towards their performance. During that lunch break, one of technicians told the staff that they should relax and enjoy the fact that if the system was down they were allowed not to work, they could rest, but they were still paid. Someone tried to explain that the mentality in that office was different, but with not much conviction. Doubts were starting to appear in the minds of many and took the following shape: if the malfunctioning of the system was a problem linked to what the IT consultant had denounced in his *j'accuse*, why should the staff not be happy to relieve themselves from work? If corruption had made its way into the WSF space, why not protest against it by simply

crossing one's arms?

On the 26th of December all the issues of the office and the confrontation between M&C and Finance are taken to the extreme level from the perspective of this article. This seemed to be the obvious outcome of two months of draining conflicts in the office all centred on the website and on FS. In my notes I reported a conversation with one of the people in charge of the office system: “[the person I was interviewing] said that there was a very heated meeting about the management of the office and the media centre at the venue. The FSF received attacks from many sides because of all the problems we had at the office with computers and servers and because of the website. Finance asked with strong voice that we revert to Windows. They said that with Windows we wouldn’t have technical problems and confrontations between those sustaining FS and those opposing the lack of accountability and the shameful incompetence of the people who were implementing those systems”. The attack was not reiterated and the obstructionism did not lead to a full reformulation of the WSF stand on information management. The media centre of WSF2004 at the Nesco ground eventually ran on Gnoware (a distribution of the GNU/Linux operating system prepared by the FSF India for the WFS) and was a major success.

#### **4. Analysis**

One of the most important achievements of the WSF India 2004 has been, as one of the members of the IOC stated, that “all the information management of the

WSF has been done without Microsoft". It was the success of a very different way of thinking of technology (Hand and Sandywell, 2002; Bach and Stark 2004), knowledge, organization, culture, society and global social change as closely interrelated. The choice to use GNU/Linux in all computers of WSF2004 was profoundly political. It was not simply a technical or economic decision that referred merely to the highest quality of GNU/Linux and to its being practically free of cost. The WSF has chosen free software as one more way to support the reasons of the struggle against marginalization, uneven and unfair distribution of resources (in this case information/ knowledge), that the groups involved in the WSF are conducting and, as stated by many as reported above, a choice against corporate software and for FS, something at the centre of the WSF's interest in the commons against private property and general intellect against intellectual property rights (Marx, 1973; Virno, 1996; Lessig, 2002 and 2004). There were also some crucial inconsistencies and tensions between the organizational structure of the WSF India and the ideological and technical requirements of free software. The analysis of this aspect of the case study exposed the complex political and organizational dynamics that took place in the WSF process with reference to the use of free software. These dynamics were informed by different and often contrasting perceptions of the technical and political implications of free software carried by the organizers of the WSF, the activist of the free software movement, the users of free software, the participant of the WSF and the actors involved in its organization, and the volunteers who made sure that the daily office administration was carried forward successfully through the use of the new technological companion: GNU/Linux.

The analysis of the case study so far has exposed a number of inconsistencies between the culture of the Mumbai office and the stated organisational culture and values of the WSF. In what follows I briefly make a link between organisational structure and culture and I then focus on the latter (for a detailed discussion of the former, see chapter 5). The debate on the organisational structure of the WSF has stimulated commentators, organisers and participants of the WSF who expressed views ranging from exalting a rigidly structured organisational model with strong leadership to praising a self-organised and fully unstructured WSF. The WSF is trying to reinvent democracy by formulating new organisational cultures and structures (Graeber, 2002). The cleavage between new forms of organisation and those pushed for by activists linked to traditional organisations (parties and unions) have often created the conditions for the organisational chaos that too often describes the WSF. The inability to establish clear organisational priority, guidelines and leadership has given to many the impression that this was in fact part of the new organisational culture of the WSF and therefore a deliberate organisational design<sup>243</sup>. However, as I showed above no new organisational culture was performed in Mumbai, but the lack of any clear indication generated what reported above: conflict waste of resources, frustration. The implications of this failure seem to justify the criticisms voiced by many of the culture of horizontality of the WSF. For instance, against those who advocate horizontal organisational forms, Epstein exposes the key issues of that strategy comparing un-coordinated activists in horizontal structures to swarming mosquitoes:

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<sup>243</sup> Many volunteers and staff members often asked me if in my previous experience of WSF year events I had witnessed the same organisational culture and if what I could see in Mumbai was "normal".

A swarm of mosquitoes is good for harassment, for disrupting the smooth operation of power and thus making it visible. But there are probably limits to the numbers of people willing to take on the role of the mosquito. A movement capable of transforming structures of power will have to involve alliances, many of which will probably require more stable and lasting forms of organization than now exist within the anti-globalization movement with firmer structures of decision-making and accountability. An alliance among the anti-globalization movement and organizations of color and labor, would require major political shifts within the latter. But it would also require some relaxation of anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical principles on the part of activists in the anti-globalization movement (2001-13).

I discussed in more detail the implications of the present research as far as the organisational structure is concerned in chapter 5; here I assess more closely the relation between a chaotic organisational structure and the values that allegedly should shape it. The main weakness of the organisational structure of WSF2004 was its incongruence with some of the principles expressed in the Charter: according to Sen (2004) the organisational culture expressed in the Indian WSF was more a product of the specific organisational culture developed in India rather than the application of the values of the Charter. Against openness, transparency, collaborative work, negotiated strategies, democratic and horizontal processes, the Indians performed an organisational culture which was based on a cult of the personality of the leader, was vertical and hierarchical and opaque up to the point of being authoritarian and corrupt. The clash between the aspirations of the WSF and its organisational culture could not have been more evident. Wainwright's (2004) discussed some aspects of this asymmetry between goals and means in the WSF. She referred to the opposition waged by leftist politics against the corporate



world on the basis of their different understanding of knowledge and power dynamics.

But paradoxically whereas corporations have been able to develop and fully take advantage of networked structures their diffused power structures and used them as more subtle forms of control of labour, leftist parties and unions keep organisational structures rigidly centralised based on forms of linear rationality not even fully supported within the corporate world. They inevitably take that organisational culture into the WSF which, as a consequence, is not performing a new organisational culture at all by reproduces a previous and unsuccessful one. Not only this: these organisational choices while lagging behind the level of analysis produced by corporations strongly contradicts the values of the WSF. Instead of being defeated in its challenge to corporate power, the WSF risks to set up a monumental self-defeating process. Santos (2005) and Sen (2004) take the analysis further by linking epistemology, culture of politics, and organisation. It is in this logical succession that I situate the analysis of the following pages in which I link the arguments of this chapter with those discussed in the previous chapter on organisation and to those on the epistemological struggle of the WSF and the experimentation of its culture of politics discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

Horizontal networks produce different cosmologies from those produced by hierarchical organisations. Vertical structures tend to be competitive whereas horizontal structures are collaborative (Graeber, 2004; Juris, 2004 and Forthcoming; Nunes, 2005). A clear symptom of the mentioned incongruence

between aspirations and daily practices was the emergence of heated conflicts on the main aim of the office structure: the goal oriented “productivity paradigm” was challenged by the “process paradigm” stressing the necessary political nature of ‘processes’. These contentions are disposed over a double set of dual oppositions: on one side they represent a typical argument of contention between traditional left and NGO activists over technocratic or political approaches to social change; on the other, they represent the collision of two different understandings of politics: the “old” of the traditional left organisations (parties, trade unions) and NGOs, and the “new” instantiated by the free software movement, small anarchist groups, proponents of the “open space” discourse, and horizontal organisations of diverse ideological credo (De Angelis, 2004).

In the WSF office different understandings and practices clashed often exposing the polarization of the understanding of the role and structure of the organisation, between the two parties struggling for leadership in WSF2004. But also what was clearly evident since early in the process was the gap between discourses and daily practices as a direct consequence of the struggle over leadership. The discourse emphasised the importance to act in sensitive ways towards individuals in order to fully appreciate their contribution to the process. However, frustration for the lack of tangible results often translated in obsessive stress on the importance of sticking to specific policy prescriptions (March and Simon, 1958); if for many the way in which results were obtained was almost more important than reaching those objectives, at times harsh challenges came to this understanding as a reactive behaviour ignited by the thought of the January

deadline (Gulick, 1978); if power has been declared illegal within the WSF boundaries, reference to morality was often resisted with incredible energy: as it was for power, morality was resisted out of fear, rather than a political commitment to a specific strategy.

Banning power, morality and ethics from the debate prevented the Indian organisers from finding solutions to their conflicts. A whole set of political and technical tools could have been devised and applied to make the work of the office more coherent and consistent with the values of the WSF, but were never considered. Many in the office, among them staff, volunteers and some IOC members, offered often their suggestions, but nothing could shake the paralysis of those who could have taken the right political decision. After the consultant's *j'accuse* many attacked the coordination of M&C, accusing them of being corrupt and raising "the moral issue" as many called it. The IOC was united in rejecting the invitation to investigate. All those I spoke to confirmed that such a debate on the basis of morality would have pulverised WSF India. Of this fact everyone was sure, within and without the organisational framework. Although a journalist of the vernacular press challenged M&C in a ferocious meeting, he was later induced to abandon his attempts to unveil the truth on the alleged corruption for the sake of WSF India. The political and ethical paralysis of the leadership of WSF2004 was due to the incredible fragility of the process and in turn it worsened that fragility. So much so, that too many never really believed the January event could ever take place and claimed it was a miracle that such a patchy and flawed process produced such a remarkable result. The WSF in India was built on very shaky

ethical and organisational foundations and any call for coherence and consistency with the values of the WSF was immediately dismissed. The interest shared by all IWC members went beyond the ethical and cultural foundations on which the WSF was built so far away from India. The mobilisation aspect and the political wish to build a political alliance at a national basis was the drive shared by the vast majority of the Indian organisers and was what, all the conflicts notwithstanding, allowed such a resounding success such as that represented by the January event.

## **Conclusion**

The case here discussed highlighted a wide set of issues that plagued the organisational process of WSF2004. Rooted in the conflictual backdrop of the Indian civil society, they manifested themselves in several ways within the WSF office. I showed above how the conflict over the technology used for the information management system in the WSF2004 office was, in fact, not only motivated by a poor understanding of the importance of the issues at stake. Beyond its actual relevance, it became a catalyst of deeper conflicts. Motivated by the desire to allow an important space to an alternative information system to the world dominant Microsoft produced, the use of GNU/Linux soon lost its value and became significant of something else than the struggle against the monopoly and commoditisation of knowledge imposed by ICT multinationals and intellectual property rights legislation. The association of the FS discourse to an accusation of corruption pre-empted the chances of success of FS in the wider

ICS. Indeed only in occasional cases FS has been adopted by organisations of the WSF India. I showed in this chapter how the row over the website became a pretext to fight a wider conflict between NGO and left activists. The political conflict between these two parties over the leadership of the office, turned later into a cluster of confrontations that involved everyone in the office. Started as a conflict at the political level (see chapter 5), it became a conflict over the management of the office. Later it opposed office management and office staff. It finally produced fractures between staff in the office. At times, during December, it was impossible to imagine that that work environment pretended to be an example of a viable and alternative world constructed on solidarity, justice and peace.

In the several conversations I had during the months I was in Mumbai with all those involved in the WSF office I could list a recurrent list of reasons claimed to be responsible for the conflicts in WSF2004. These were due, according to those interviewed, to: lack of rules and regulations; lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities; lack of leadership or wrong/counter-productive leadership; confusion between political and administrative roles and the relation between those two fields (and the impossibility to tell them apart); sectoral interests; personal interests; power imbalances; cultural differences; structural/systemic positioning; poor communication; poor or inadequate organisational structure and a lack of teamwork due to a fundamental lack of personal trust. In the office, roles and responsibilities were never clear, they used to move from person to person, tasks were never consistently assigned. Due to these reasons, the coordination was

not efficient and caused frustration and waste of human and material resources. I claim here instead that, although the main discussions related to software and information technology were informed by efficiency arguments, the implementation of the different information system designs did not respond to the demands of the 'efficiency requirements' but it was originally meant (and this goal is consistent with the activist of the Free Software movement) as a political tool against the commoditisation of knowledge and the control of creativity by big software and media multinationals (Lessig, 2004). Insofar the efficiency argument was the leitmotif of the discourse on system management in the WSF 2004, it is necessary to assess the consequences of this discourse when applied to a politically defined environment like the WSF. In fact, the efficiency argument became too often the way to displace crucial discussions on the political reasons of the failures observed. Moreover, the stress on "efficiency" contradicted the claim of the WSF to focus on democratic and open processes rather than on efficient technologies to engage with the social consequences of neoliberalism and with its organisational and productive structures. In other words, as already showed (chapter 5), the WSF resorted to managerial discourses displacing (indeed denying) power from its institutional space, in order to keep at bay conflicts it did not know how to handle. This strategy was absolutely congruent to the neoliberal culture of systematic de-politicisation of human and social organisation.

At the same time, when the efficiency argument was used, the open space argument was deployed to counter it. This argument maintained that the WSF is an open space where it is difficult to impose rules and where other principles must

inform the work mentality other than the efficiency one. All sorts of mismanagements, wastes, frustrations, and political dynamics were explained, for instrumental political reasons, as the colours of the rainbow that is the WSF. Building on the issues discussed so far, it is possible to draw some important lessons. The technical and the organisational aspects were not closely articulated and politically negotiated in WSF2004. Also, the volunteers of the FSF were never really put in the condition to provide an efficient system and to articulate with the members of the IOC a discourse around the principles of their engagement with the political economy of knowledge at the global level. Those principles called for a struggle against the total domination by a handful of corporations of the production and distribution of electronic knowledge. The actors of that struggle against the likes of Microsoft are thousands of small groups of activists and hackers for whom the design and coding of the GNU/Linux operating system is their way to struggle for freedom of expression and for a better world. The previous considerations notwithstanding, I'm not suggesting here that a different approach to information management would have avoided the confrontations that took place in the WSF office in Mumbai. However, the politicisation of the technology used would have exposed the political nature of the confrontations at play and might have avoided the extension of the conflicts for leadership at all levels in the office. What I describe above gives a grim image of WSF2004. However, the general assessment of the WSF India would be highly inaccurate if it concluded as above. In fact, as I show above, the crises generated by the shortcomings of the organisational system in WSF2004 constituted the necessary foundations of a long lasting process of trust building in ICS. The

recognition of the fundamental role played by the WSF was consensual by all members of the IOC. Moreover, as I discuss in the next chapter, WSF2004 needs to be assessed not only (and not even mainly) against the aspirations, the “dreams” referred to by the resigning IOC member, but against its stated mission to build a national alliance (WSF India, 2002b) of organisations and movements of the Indian civil society against neoliberalism, communalism and casteism in India. WSF2004 did not fully comply with desires and aspirations thought of and expressed thousands of miles away and built on the basis of a very different set of historical and cultural specificities, however, as I claim later, and important limitations nonetheless, WSF2004 can be considered a milestone in a crucial process to be developed in the following years in India (the constitution of a big progressive national alliance) and at the global level (the consolidation of the organisational and ideological infrastructure of a truly global civil society).



## **Chapter 7. The Future of the WSF**

In this chapter I evaluate the WSF2004 process assessing its potentialities to lead to a long-lasting convergence of Indian SCO&Ms. I also show how that national project contributed to consolidate the strategic links between Indian activists and their counterparts in South Asia, Africa and South America. These organisational infrastructure and strategic alliances were constituted in a process of recursive feedback loop with the WSF vision of a better world and with the political and ideological conflicts discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. The assessment of WSF India represents in this context the initial condition to anticipate the future of the WSF at a global level and sets the stage for a reflection on the theoretical implications of the present analysis of WSF2004. This chapter is divided into three parts. Part one assesses the evaluation process of WSF2004 and its evolution into a national forum through the organisation of the first Indian Social Forum (ISF). Part two discusses the implications of the Indian process for the future of the WSF at the global level. I assess how the process of intense negotiations in the WSF foretells its future. I discuss strategies of institutional learning and direct and indirect influences that WSF2004 had in the Indian political scenario and in the WSF global process. Part three analyses some important documents produced by the IC and discusses on the crucial topic of the future of the WSF. I conclude that the process that followed WSF2004 both in India and globally confirms some expectations about the WSF: the WSF does contribute to the consolidation of national political alliances using powerful

ideological and organisational, but also tactical and strategic tools; moreover, the leverage made by the WSF global process on national processes, in this case the Indian WSF, established an iterative process of development of the cultural, ideological and political dimensions of the “WSF” (here freed from its local, national or global attributions).

### **1. From WSF2004 to ISF2006.**

Through the analysis of the Indian WSF I discussed (see in particular chapter 5) the ability of the WSF to fulfil at the same time global aspirations and national political contingencies by, on one side, reinforcing the expansion of the WSF process in the Indian Subcontinent and, on the other, laying the foundations of an Indian political alliance against neoliberalism, casteism and communalism. WSF2004 attracted a vast number of progressive activists of Indian civil society: a consistent transformation of the Indian political discourse could be observed as a consequence of the complex web of ideological, political and cultural negotiations that intervened among those actors within WSF India<sup>244</sup>. In the previous chapters I showed how these negotiations were conducted at the managerial, administrative and political levels. The internal process of evaluation of WSF2004 concluded that, whatever limitations and difficulties had to be overcome along the way, the WSF had shown in India its potentialities as a tool for mobilisation against neoliberalism. In this section I discuss first the evaluation of WSF2004 and then the process that set the ground for what became the first Indian Social Forum

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<sup>244</sup> On travelling discourses along activists networks see Mouffe, 1989.

(ISF2006).

WSF2004 was a success that surpassed everyone's expectations. The highlights of that success<sup>245</sup> were the size of the event, the relative inclusiveness of the organisational process compared to previous editions, the diversity of the participants, and the innovations contributed to the global WSF<sup>246</sup>. WSF2004 was a turning point for the WSF: in Mumbai the subaltern took the stage to protest their condition of growing marginalisation (Callinicos, 2004; Boutelja, 2004). Dalit and Adivasi (Chakma, 2004) participated in great number reversing the Brazilian trend that saw mainly white and highly educated participants. To the success of WSF2004, what Whitaker (2005) called the qualitative leap of the WSF process, contributed substantially, apart from the social, political and cultural Indian milieu, the fact that it was organised in Mumbai (Santos, 2005), city that is image of the very contradictions that the WSF is fighting (Lamb, 2004; Whitaker, 2005; Prashad, 2004)<sup>247</sup>. WSF2004 introduced crucial issues in the global debate that reflected the local specificities of the new context: religion as political context, the centrality of war for the expansion of neoliberalism in Asia and the discrimination on the basis of descent and profession. For the first time the financial management of the forum was partially negotiated during open

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<sup>245</sup> Collections of reports can be found at [www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org), [www.alainet.org](http://www.alainet.org), [www.lavaca.org](http://www.lavaca.org), [www.choike.org](http://www.choike.org). The general attention paid by the mainstream media to WSF2004 was marginal (Simonson, 2004; and Kagarlitsky, 2004; Medeiros, 2005).

<sup>246</sup> IOC list, January, 2005: WSF2004 was "a milestone in the struggle against imperialist globalisation". The day before in another message to the list a member stated that: "WSF2004 was an historical moment (...). It was an event (...) to be remembered in our life time".

<sup>247</sup> See also Vanaik, 2004: "Mumbai, the city most starkly symbolizing the impact of neoliberalism in India. Mumbai is a rapidly de-industrialising, financial-commercial-services centre with an expanding informal sector of self-employed and unorganized labour. It has (...) over 40 percent of its 17 million population living in slums. The choice of the WSF venue – a dusty, environment-unfriendly, long disused industrial site – completed the symbolism".

meetings; cultural performances were given central role as political instrument (Correa, 2003:114)<sup>248</sup>; the mobilisation process was more inclusive geographically and sectorially than ever before; the programme was only partially centrally designed; for the first time the information systems were managed with free software; the venue of the event was more consistent with the WSF ideals (Corbyn, 2004). All this made of WSF2004 a “great educational event”<sup>249</sup>.

However, a number of points were raised for consideration. The WSF has been accused (Shiva in Hayden, 2004) of imitating the organisational dysfunctions of present world society such as gigantism and centralism. For Stetten and Steinhilber (2004) WSF2004 had been mainly a social, mundane, event for civil society brokers where seeing and being seen was the main objective. For others (Glasius and Timms, 2006; Harman and Prasad, 2004; Callinicos, 2004) it had been a carnival of the global civil society where colours, songs, dances, slogans, the great diversity of voices and languages parading in the Mumbai venue, gave to all participants an energetic boost, but no change was brought about. The critics exposed important inconsistencies between the claimed features of the other world advocated by the organisers and the reality of a forum venue where marginalisation was still evident within the boundaries of WSF2004 at the cultural, social and political level: builders, cleaners, security guards, mostly low caste, did not take part in what they were working for even though they were within a framework that criticised the exploitative and alienating relationship

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<sup>248</sup> The cultural programme was defined “the best cultural programme in India in years” (personal notes of the Mumbai 28-29 February 2004).

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

between employer and employee. WSF2004 was gendered<sup>250</sup>, racialised and casteised; disabled people had to struggle to take part in the proceedings of the WSF; clear hierarchies were in place with VIP speakers, members of the press, better if mainstream, and party leaders, on top (Biccum, 2005). To assess relevance and implications of both praises and criticisms, the IOC called for a two-day meeting to thoroughly evaluate WSF2004.

Fixed for the end of February, that meeting set the path for the future of the WSF in India. The conflict between left and NGO activists became the backdrop against which all the other issues were discussed. Although many realised that the Indian process extended the boundaries of internal democracy within the WSF process, a lot still needed to be done about the authoritarian behaviour of those from bigger and more powerful organisations (parties and NGOs) and the consequent opacity of the decision-making process. The organisational structure of the WSF was discussed in detail in order to propose its necessary refashioning. Many NGOs and social movement activists suggested dissolving the IOC because its role was complete and its permanence could create organisational crystallization and bureaucratisation<sup>251</sup>. Among the suggestions, the expansion of the IGC (with

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<sup>250</sup> A member of the IOC denounced, in the February meeting, the obnoxious behaviours against her and other women, commenting that patriarchal behaviours were all too common in the WSF India. Patriarchal culture manifested itself not only with women but also with youth, Dalits, Adivasi. In the meeting in February, when selecting the chair the members nominated to chair the meeting three male members, then somebody decided that one woman would have created the "necessary gender balance". Moreover, when it had to be decided who would take the minutes, everyone agreed that the younger had to do it (who was also the only woman in the chair) (personal notes of the meeting).

<sup>251</sup> This apparently simple process took more than a year due to much resistance. In September 2004, I came to know that some of the resistance was due to the valuable political currency that the "title" of IOC member had in India of which some members did not want to be stripped. The IOC was dissolved in Delhi in September 2004 (interview over the internet with a former office staff).

stress on state processes in order to make it more inclusive of the whole ICS<sup>252</sup>) caught a great deal of attention; more controversial the proposal to institute WSF coordination offices in all Indian states. On the principles of the reformulation of WSF India, everyone agreed that the organisational restructuring had to put specific attention to both political<sup>253</sup> and managerial/administrative issues. It was mentioned the need to refine the organisational structure on the basis of a “flat” design with no head and many centres, which could fulfil the WSF aspiration of openness and inclusion. Moreover, it was remarked the need to reformulate the criteria with which members of groups and coordinators were chosen, in order to avoid the kind of political settlements typical in India based on clientelism and nepotism (of which civil society was not totally immune)<sup>254</sup>. The outcomes of the organisational restructuring saw the IOC dissolved, the IGC expanded with special attention to those sectors marginalised in the previous events, and the IWC consolidated and expanded to be more representative. A number of working groups were appointed in order to carry out ad-hoc tasks like documentation, support to the social audit, definition of the political aims of WSF India and possible links with other Asian and African forums. A coordinating office was setup in Delhi.

If the debate on the organisational structure centred on the infrastructure to be set up to create the national alliance aspiration of the activists of WSF India, the

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<sup>252</sup> The IGC came often under attack during the process for being a “virtual” body and a never-convened one. State committees should replace it and keep the function of higher political body of WSF India.

<sup>253</sup> Strong voices opposed the focus on sectors for future mobilisation and for IGC expansion.

<sup>254</sup> This was one of the most conflictual issues in the whole process and one that I collected the most number of opinions against: the interviewees mentioned the sectoral and geographical, but also the political rationale with which appointments were made and linked this habit with the most pernicious practices of bad governance that afflict the Indian polity.

complementary issue was represented by the educational process through which reinforce the ideological counter-hegemony among the actors convened by the WSF India. The programme of WSF2004 was therefore scrutinised and several suggestions made for the future ISF. It was acknowledged that the WSF2004 programme reflected the specificities of India (Stetten and Steinhilber, 2004). A lot of attention was put into topics such as “religious fundamentalism”, “casteism”, and “communalism”. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan were discussed thoroughly; dowry related issues, child labour, sexual rights, informal sector and employment were at the core of the programme. But at the same time the process to select shape and activities of that programme involved many harsh (see chapter 5)<sup>255</sup>. Another crucial problem raised by the performance of most activities in WSF2004 referred to the understanding by different activists of the features of the counter-education crucial to formulate an alternative to neoliberalism (see chapter 3). In this sense, the lack of interactions between speakers and audience (Simonson, 2004; Harman and Prasad, 2004; Hayden, 2004) was exposed as a feature of a programme of indoctrination rather than one of participatory construction of a shared knowledge by the participants to the forum.

The same opposing views about indoctrination or participatory construction of a shared ideological framework were raised with reference to the process of mobilisation for the January event. Filling the open space with a critical mass of participants was, after all, the main interest of the organisers, and although the mobilisation for Mumbai was socially wider than in previous occasions, the

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<sup>255</sup> This was a recurrent problem that accompanied the WSF since its beginning (Whitaker, 2004:118).

reduced participation of peasants and Adivasi was highlighted. The complete lack of Muslims both in the process and in the event was felt the most: as one of the members noted, this had a lot to do with the decision to declare the forum a secular space, which hinders the process of outreach to Muslim activists<sup>256</sup>.

The shortcomings of the mobilisation process for WSF2004 blatantly expose one of the major miscalculations of WSF India: the fundamental need to politically engage with social and cultural differences in the Indian civil society. At the core of the WSF strategy to create a new political subject and a new culture of politics is the facilitation of the process of negotiation of the different strands of the WSF. On the nature of those negotiations some have radical ideas that involved a full reformulations of identities and belief by all the actors involved, others a very limited approach to alliance building as shown in the words reported by Lamb of a peasant leader and member of the CPI-ML: "We need to open our minds a bit, and they need to be more concrete in their understanding of what this other world is about. (...) While we of the left are very clear on what alternative we want, it is still very necessary to take as much of the world's people with us. (...) All these little groups that are just fighting one issue, fighting a problem in a village or a small area, can suddenly realise that it is a much larger problem" (Lamb, 2004). Others have to understand, she says, truth is with us. Many have had enough of this attitude. In the Mumbai evaluation meeting members were very sceptical on how WSF India had dealt with differences. A member stated that "the WSF process has suppressed differences and not created dynamics and space. It was not

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<sup>256</sup> Daulatzai has written on the potential democratic contradictions linked to declaring the WSF a secular space (2004).



reconciliation of differences but suppression that made us able to organize WSF”<sup>257</sup>.

To confirm this attitude, at an evaluation meeting that took place in Delhi few days before the Mumbai one, it was agreed not to talk about acrimonies and differences to avoid the risk of creating fractures among the organisers. An incident that took place during the Mumbai evaluation meeting can illustrate the approaches to difference by many in the WSF India. One of the facilitators of the Culture group expressed his distaste for the way in which that group had been conducted with 12 facilitators working without transparency and under the informal leadership of one of the members. The reaction of the others was varied: some acknowledged that there was a problem but that the IOC was not empowered to resolve those conflicts, others mentioned that personal clashes are inevitable in such processes and those clashes needed to be accepted and lived with, yet others pointed at a collective failure of the IOC that was not able to discuss these kind of issues and had not found a way to set guidelines to deal with these issues. The general atmosphere was one of resigned pessimism about the ability of the WSF to deal with difference. Many simply maintained that there was no need at all to discuss differences, but instead it made sense to refer to the “open space” discourse and consider differences as a given that did not need be negotiated, least of all by the IOC. A Mumbai member, belonging to the team that designed the venue of WSF2004, argued that issues like those are not only political and not only partially related to individual personalities but also have

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<sup>257</sup> Personal notes from the meeting.

organisational resonance. In this sense and with respect to the process of formalisation of the WSF India structure, it was necessary to approach conflict in a more consistent way in order to provide the organisational structure with the instruments to intervene in cases of dysfunctional conflict. Others maintained that differences cannot ever be negotiated with words but only common actions and shared political activity will help create networks of trust among the Indian activists.

The core issue highlighted by this debate is one of absolute importance for the future of the WSF. It opposed a strategic approach to alliance building to a more tactical and contingent one. The activists belonging to trade unions and mass movements linked to the left parties tend to subscribe to a more tactical process of alliance building with electoral outcomes, whereas NGOs and single issue activists challenge this opportunistic perspective on political action and aim at contributing to a process of profound re-definition of identity, goals and instruments of all the members involved in the WSF. As in many other cases this debate is not simply reduced to the two extreme positions here sketched, but it involves a range of more nuanced and often shifting positions. The consideration reported above, voiced by an influential NGO member often close to the positions of the CPI-M activists, that only the practice of shared planning for action can constitute an effective means to negotiate differences within the WSF, well expresses the main potentiality of the WSF at the global level to become the privileged space where progressive civil society activists learn a shared political language.

## 1.1. Towards the ISF

The above issues notwithstanding, the spirit with which collaboration was performed by such diverse actors was one of the most significant successes of WSF2004<sup>258</sup> and although not perfect that experience needed to be continued<sup>259</sup>. This gave to some the feeling that more ambitious objectives should be discussed such as state, sectoral, country-wide or even regional forums<sup>260</sup>. What was common to all the proposals was the desire to create a group of people who will mobilise within the framework of the WSF<sup>261</sup>. As one IOC member wrote “one lesson which none of us should forget is that WSF process attracts more people and networks than any alliance put up by us. So, all of us have a collective responsibility to nurture this larger process”<sup>262</sup>. Another member reflected thus:

the various battles we are fighting at local, regional and national level have little chance of success without international fighting alliances. (...) The WSF gave participants an exposure to international and other Indian movements which to some extent helped to influence the sense of isolation and insularity which had overtaken our local movements and organizations. Many local, sectoral alliances have formed/strengthened as part of the WSF<sup>263</sup>.

The most noticeable such alliances were the alliances between Dalits, NO-Vox

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<sup>258</sup> IOC list January 2004.

<sup>259</sup> IOC list February 2004: “Let us move ahead while burying all the negative differences and take constructive critic of our future role as lessons learnt to strengthen our power”.

<sup>260</sup> Minutes of the preparatory meeting for the Bangalore NC, Mumbai 9<sup>th</sup> June.

<sup>261</sup> IOC list, February 2004.

<sup>262</sup> IOC list, February 2004: “We started something which has provided hope (...) of viable alternatives to the right wing in India and South Asia”.

<sup>263</sup> IOC list, February 2004.

network, Human Rights Caucus and Quilombo and other civil rights movements; the women's alliance that involved DAWN, Akshara, Articulacion Feminista Marcosur and others; trade unions held conferences, a forum on water gathered enormous consensus with movements in India, as many other more or less sizeable transnational initiatives. The challenges ahead were related to, among others, the following crucial aspects as an IOC member put it:

There needs to be some amount of separation between the political process and the operational side of the event. (...). Consultations and decision making process need to be much broader (...). We need to see how we can translate the mobilisation into action without compromising the 'open space'<sup>264</sup>.

Part of the fundamental difficulties of the follow up activities in India had to deal with ideological issues. Discussing ideological issues is imperative because "it is important to base on a political ideology to take the process further - a convergence of political thinking is necessary otherwise we will be jumping from one event to another without any meaningful political engagements"<sup>265</sup>. In the words of one of the organisers:

people who believe in building another world were pouring in as drops of forces that needs to be carefully harnessed and consolidated. (...) WSF2004 is a clear message to all of us to sustain the hope and provide a space for the forces of the masses to converge in a more pragmatic and through strategic interventions to counter the imperialistic globalisation, (...) to politically engage ourselves to seize the power at all levels to realise the dreams of the exploited and the poor.

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

The dissonance<sup>266</sup> with the WSF principles is striking here and once more exposes the difficulty to interpret the nature of the WSF within the Indian political scenario<sup>267</sup>. Interesting considerations by Oded Grajev were reported at the meeting in February according to which if the WSF does not catalyse action it will bureaucratised and lose its interest. It is crucial, then, to establish in India how to make the WSF meaningful towards political change. After Mumbai, it became soon clear to everyone that although strategically diverging in some aspects, the majority of activists expected from the WSF process to inspire, facilitate or establish a strong alliance of the Indian left. To prevent the process of construction of this political subject being dominated by old political strategies, many of the NGOS and social movements activists claimed that it was necessary to avoid presenting the IOC as a vanguard of a revolutionary social movement (in this at least verbally they were supported by some party activists who promised that the era of the vanguardist party had past). Instead the WSF should facilitate the convergence of activists into its space: once the number reaches a critical mass, it will naturally organise and turn to political action. The next step, as reported in the minutes of the June Mumbai IOC meeting will have to be "to organise an ISF (...) and to follow up on the state processes so that we are able to maximise participation and focus on different specific issues which would help to make the alliances we are building more effective and action oriented".

The immediate agreement on taking WSF India forward confirms the perception,

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<sup>266</sup> The WSF "definitely has that quality [of a social movement]": IOC list, February 2004.

<sup>267</sup> IOC list, January 2004: "Imperialist globalisation, communalism and casteism are daily increasing (...) now we should move on to how we plan and coordinate our struggles against these major threats. A plan of action is badly needed if all the work that has been put in so far is not to go in vain".

voiced long before the Mumbai event, of the role that WSF2004 played in India. Correa saw the Indian events as contributing to create a fundamental converging trajectory for the left in India (2003:115) by allowing all the different strands to converge within the WSF framework. For many in India, organising the forum in 2004 was strategically relevant for the March general elections. The fragmented left needed to put aside differences and join forces: the forum seemed to provide the ideal arena for that to happen<sup>268</sup>.

At the other end of the spectrum Vanaik (2004) was sceptical. He believed WSF2004 had little or no importance for Indian political life. The relevant press only marginally covered the forum and described it more as a self-indulgent celebration than a real political actor. In Mumbai neither the right wing ally of the BJP government, Shiv Sena, nor the state government, run by a coalition led by the Congress party, paid attention to the event. This for two different reasons: in the case of the Shiv Sena they must have considered the WSF a very small event and with no local political relevance; in the case of the Congress party it was partly because its economic positions are pro-liberalisation, its international politics is played within the influence space of the US and its stand on religion has not always been radically against communal politics. But if, according to Vanaik, the WSF has limited relevance, he does see an opportunity established by the WSF in India: "The intent here is not an electoral bloc but the formation of a long term alliance of left parties and their mass fronts with the big social movements and a range of progressive NGOs to collectively mobilise in civil society"

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<sup>268</sup> As far as the relevance of the WSF process for the Indian political scenario is concerned, it was stated that "these processes did contribute to the recent election campaigns and results as well" (Minutes of the Mumbai based IOC meeting, June 2004).

(2004b)<sup>269</sup>. Although, as detailed earlier, divisions and conflicts are abundant in the Indian left, Vanaik finds that the movement that is bringing closer parties to social movements and progressive NGOs is real and consistent and is taking place from both sides: a movement started before the WSF, that has been consolidated in Mumbai and that promises to be negotiated further in the years to come. The complexities of this debate are reflected in the IOC negotiations to design the next steps for the WSF in India. Two positions came to the fore about the scope and potentialities of WSF in India. The first, voiced immediately after the Mumbai event, advocated for the use of the structures of the WSF India for electoral campaigning from the local to the national and country level for the March general elections. The other position appeared to be more cautious about enthusiastically taking the WSF into the political realm. The two positions being represented by trade unions, mass movements and party members on one side and by NGOs and single issues movements on the other.

When the desire to continue with the WSF India was promptly transformed in a bid to organise an ISF, it generated new conflicts. The first one exploded at the NC held in June in Bangalore and it was about the venue of the ISF. Strong bids were made to hold the ISF in Chennai. Others suggested Delhi, given that the South had already a meeting in Hyderabad. The clash between northern and southern activists was sharp and exposed the political divide between north and south India. Once more the WSF offered the chance to Indian activists to expose

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<sup>269</sup> In February 2004, in an informal interview with a member of M&C, I've been told that "It is premature to assess the possibility of political alliances against the right because of the years of grassroots work of the communal right and because of the difficulties in negotiating the differences among groups on the left. However, many conversations on electoral strategies are taking place in corridors of WSF meetings".

and negotiate a crucial social and political divide. The conflict was not negotiated in public but informal negotiations took place and the final decision was to host the ISF in Delhi. The crucial importance of Delhi as a venue was explained as follows: Delhi being the capital, there would be a better press coverage by the national press and a stress on the relevance of lobbying and challenging power in the place where it exercises its authority.

In order to expand the ISF and make it more inclusive, many initiatives were discussed to share with local political allies information on globalisation and neoliberalisms and the way to arrest them as debated in the WSF. The link with the local dimension would be favoured by the vernacular press who was much closer to the WSF process than the mainstream English language press. The attention to these kind of initiatives is part of the general understanding of the role of the WSF as a space for self-education (or, alternatively, indoctrination) or potential allies. Otherwise put, through these initiatives, the leadership of the WSF India sets itself the task to educate the masses and bring them within the sphere of Indian civil society (Chatterjee, 2002). A document circulated in the Delhi NC describes the political backdrop of the ISF:

The WSF process has (...) been successful in bringing together different political and social streams on a common platform to oppose the onslaught of Imperialist Globalisation. This is no mean achievement given the fragmented nature of India's polity (...). The WSF process in India has added newer dimensions in this struggle by bringing in concerns related to communalism, casteism, gender discrimination and militarisation & war. It is natural to conceive of the ISF (...) as part of the process now to consolidate and channelise the efforts of WSF-India. (...) our efforts



need to now translate into activities that build alliances, forge struggles and propose alternatives (...). the WSF process needs to enhance its visibility and impact on the political processes in this country. Concurrently, we see today a changed set of circumstances in the country's politics – largely set in motion by the results of the last General Elections. The defeat of the NDA Govt. and arguably the defeat of its policies of economic liberalisation and communalism, show that the people of this country are prepared to move decisively on these issues. Given these circumstances, the organisation of the ISF in Delhi can send a strong message to the political forces in this country. (...) Let us also remember that the window of opportunity provided by the change in political power in India and the consequent rise in aspirations of the people may not be available for an indefinite period.

To further stress the importance of the WSF in India and to indicate the clear specificities of the WSF movement in India the following passage is illuminating:

the strength of a process such as the WSF is derived from the mobilisation that it achieves and its ability to fire the imagination of the largest number of people. But, there is also a place, once a critical mass has been achieved, for a massive exposure for such a process to the largest number of people possible. We believe that the time has now come when the WSF process makes a bid for making a quantum jump into the agenda of the country.

A wide consensus building process is therefore fundamental to fully take advantage of the political opportunity and the WSF framework. The ISF is the natural consequence of the Indian political conjuncture and the political opportunity provided by the weaknesses of the right forces (Tarrow, 1994 and 1996). The first ISF took place in Delhi in November 2006. It attracted in excess of 50,000 participants who attended hundreds of seminars and cultural activities (Bidwai, 2006). It is legitimate to expect this movement to continue after the

recent successes.

## **2. WSF India and WSF Global**

The previous section dealt with the process sprung by the introduction of the WSF to India. But the process was two ways. The interaction between Indian activists and global WSF produced an important set of developments in the global WSF framework. Those influences are the matter of the following pages. The interactions between the IOC, and the BOC and the Asian partners allow us to observe in detail the mechanics of those processes of constitution of a global civil society through transnational and regional negotiations between and within national civil societies (Appadurai, 2002; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Khagram et al. 2002; Anheier et al., 2004). After the Bangalore meeting a discussion note on the WSF India process summarised its achievements<sup>270</sup>:

In India we have been able to innovate on the structure of the WSF process, while retaining its essence. The WSF process in India, drawing upon experiences in the country regarding the mounting of large campaigns (...), did not limit itself to the planning of large events. (...) the processes of organising events and activities across the country were seen to be as important as the final event itself. (...) What has been particularly heartening is that both the events saw mobilisation from sections that are socially and economically deprived, whose voices are seldom heard in the shaping of policies in the country.

In the months following the Mumbai event, some of the organisers started

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<sup>270</sup> Di Giovanni (2004) finds that WSF2004 has put on the agenda a much deeper understanding on questions related to cultural differences, popular participation, methodology and financing.

interacting more directly with the structures of governance of the WSF: BOC, IS and IC. The dense networks of contact established by the Indians with their global partners shaped considerably the nature of the WSF India and at the same time provided Brazilian and European initiators of the WSF with important feedback on its nature, potentialities and limitations. A very interesting debate took shape, around key issues such as, on one side, the theoretical, strategic and practical approach of local activists to the global WSF and, on the other, the practical ways in which the Indians could take advantage of the Mumbai event to project themselves onto the global scene of the WSF. The interactions with the Asian partners, in turn, contributed to the legitimising process of WSF2004 as an Asian process and helped Indian organisations to root themselves further in Asia through the consolidation of strategic partnerships and the initiations of new ones (Loh, 2005). In the following paragraphs I will assess the potentialities of the WSF to constitute a strategic tool for the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic global movement through local, national, transnational and regional processes.

The character of the collaboration between Indians and Brazilians was envisaged in the following terms by the Brazilians:

the WSF Secretariat can help the IGC/IOC in some issues. From one side, it can share its political and organizational experience (...). [It] can help in the international mobilization for the event in India, through multiple initiatives, conducted in a flexible, large and horizontal way. Also, it can contribute in dealing with some executive issues in the international scenery. (...) this must be discussed having as a starting point a proposal from the IOC, which is the instance that has the domain on the preparation process for the WSF2004. We consider that the issue on alternatives for

fundraising is another subject that needs to be in evidence in the agenda for the meeting between the WSF Secretariat and the IGC/IOC. An eventual international fundraising brings political problems that must be debated with transparency for all involved in the process, in India or in the international level<sup>271</sup>.

In the IWC and MOC meeting that took place in Mumbai, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> of April 2003, the allocation of tasks was done according to criteria of regional convenience, efficiency and political specificities: funding was split between IOC and BOC, communication was done separately by the two offices, the programme was designed in partnership and the international mobilisation was taken care of by the IS except the Asian mobilisation. If this was on paper, in practice things worked out differently: incomprehension and contrasting interests generated more or less open conflicts between Indians and international partners. Differences in political and ideological culture summed up to difference in daily practices and organisational strategies and the lack of time and the stress that soon built up did not allow for the necessary negotiation between the actors involved. The lack of clear strategies to deal with the inevitable conflicts did not make the task easier. The BOC sent to Mumbai its representatives for a joint meeting on 29-30 May to consolidate the WSF process in India and its interaction with the Brazilian partners. The meeting went through the history of the WSF, its move to India, and reflected on the founding values, to establish a shared discourse to build upon. Whitaker, present at that meeting, stressed that the core mission of the WSF is to facilitate a movement not to direct it, by saying this exposing the main concern of the WSF towards the Indian leadership. He adds, questioned by an Indian activist,

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<sup>271</sup> Unpublished, April 2003.

that India is strongly divided and some worry about its ability to unite for the WSF and wonder if the lack of unity would also mean that they will exclude some groups or movements. Moreover, the lack of links with India make the Brazilians feel distanced (a feeling shared by others in Europe and Latin America) and kept wondering what will the political process look like. The focus on war and Asia seems to be of much interest for the IS activists and they would like to be reassured that the Indians share this conviction. Once all those themes were thoroughly discussed and some Indian activists took advantage of the international stage provided by the Brazilians to expose their reservations on the Indian process (that surely did not make the BOC members feel reassured), the conclusion of the meeting was thus reached:

The IOC and WSF-S will work together until the evaluation of WSF2004. WSF-S will ensure the transfer of information and experience about programmatic as well as management issues. With specific reference to communication and media the WSF-S will assist the IOC in website management, transfer of software and databases, mobilizing, arranging and coordinating translation services and training IOC staff. The IOC bears the principal responsibility for the organization of WSF2004 and will enjoy the support of the WSF-S throughout. The WSF-S will take the responsibility and support the entire efforts for internationalising the WSF process and for systematising, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of WSF2004<sup>272</sup>.

The collaboration with the Brazilians was in the end less intense and efficient that it could have been. But also the collaboration with the Asian partners was left to the personal initiatives of some Indian activists who mobilised their personal networks. The official efforts to create an Asian network to support WSF2004

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<sup>272</sup> Minutes of the meeting.

were limited to the organisation of two Asian Consultations (ACs) in June and September. Key to the meetings were the discussions on organisational structure and democracy of WSF2004. The Indians took advantage of these occasions to express their full solidarity to their Asian partners affected by the “illegal and immoral” imperialist wars waged by “global predators”<sup>273</sup>. The text of an invitation to the Asian community is of interest here because traces the past experiences of the mobilisations at the continental level (Loh, 2004) on which the WSF India was building upon:

Nearly a decade before the WSF, in 1989, it was in Asia that the civil society based People's Plan for 21st century (PP21) was launched from Hiroshima, envisaging that the 21st century would belong to People of the World, through their cross-border alliances. The three declarations of the PP21, at Hiroshima (1989), Bangkok (1992) and Sagarmatha (Nepal, 1996) in many ways echo the same principles, concerns and actions which in a different form constitute the concerns of WSF. (...) we in India feel that in (...) the content and process of the event, there must be an adequate involvement of the Asian groups, since the holding of the event in India in many ways signifies the Asian character of it.

The consultations were attended by delegates from Thailand, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Highlighting continuities and differences between previous platforms and the WSF, constitutes a conscious attempt to negotiate alternative ways to strengthen the continental collaboration. If the process in India promises consistent successes towards the constitution of a unitary, if deeply conflictual, Indian progressive alliance, the Asian process informally initiated numerous and widespread networks and alliance at the

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<sup>273</sup> Invitation for the AC (unpublished, 2003).

continental level (Loh, 2005). A reinforcement of the connections between some strategic cores in Asia, such as the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, and India took place. It is legitimate to expect those cores to further expand the nodes of their network into the whole continent; the importance played in this process by the ACs was often reiterated<sup>274</sup> if, I believe, overrated.

In conjunction with the transnational interactions with Brazilian, and the regional interactions with Asian partners, the Indians had the chance to interact with dozens of influential organisations represented in the IC. The first important meeting during the WSF2004 process took place in Miami, 23-26 June. The issues discussed referred to mobilisation, programme and finance, but the most strategic issues revolved around funding. The Indian position not to accept funds from big foundations and bilateral agencies of states involved in the Asian wars, forced the WSF to deeply revise its funding policy. It was the first time in which the political relevance of funding was addressed in a WSF meeting: the contribution of the Indians was crucial. This episode confirms once more the ability of the forum to engage positively with national political discourses and make of them an endowment of the global initiative. Those processes of political negotiation are the foundations of the construction of a truly global alliance against neoliberalism not based on imposed a-priori but on open, if fierce and conflictual, negotiations. The specific position that emerged from the negotiations in Miami required extra effort in raising the necessary funds in order to keep with the political position taken: the seed for a new instrument was put in fertile ground. Beyond the

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<sup>274</sup> See for instance, NC Bangalore.

commitment to raise internal funding in India and the contribution by the participant through fees, the concept of solidarity funding was sketched as instantiation of the proactive inclusiveness of the WSF: this instrument helped collect money from richer actors and channel them to areas where funds were scarcer.

The global links of the majority of the actors of the Indian WSF played a crucial role in WSF2004 but a coordinated communicative strategy was missing. The IOC maintained selective contacts with Brazilian and European organisers of the WSF and ESF<sup>275</sup>, nonetheless the pressures of the external environment made the Indians aware of the global audience and forced them to address some of its concerns in so doing setting the ground for the elaboration of a language intelligible in the global context framed within the WSF discourse. After WSF2004 and giving its resounding success, a more intense collaboration between the two groups was envisaged and some grudging comment was voiced on the imbalance of that interaction:

No one is happy that WSF is taken back to Brazil again. We could recognise and appreciate the effort of the Brazilians for being the mentors and promoters of this effort, but equally we have a right to condemn them for their monopolistic attitude and behaviour (...). There is no meaning for Brazilians to call this as "W" SF<sup>276</sup>.

Conditions and relevance of a collaborative work were thoroughly assessed in the

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<sup>275</sup> "Mumbai was basically organised by the India committee; the IC and the Secretariat had little participation". Statement of an IC member circulated on the IOC list in April 2005.

<sup>276</sup> IOC list, January 2004.



months following WSF2004. Considering fundamental to gain even more legitimacy at the international level and build further networks for action and campaign, the Indians sought to maximise their input in the following WSF2005. However, as one member expressed in the February meeting, “We did not take anyone of them into our process, so they won’t take us there”<sup>277</sup>.

Some Indian activists highlighted the crucial role of the IC for the Indians to interact fully with global partners avoiding that “insularity” that makes activists in India forgetful of the rest of the world<sup>278</sup>. Some suggested that the Indians should concentrate on WSF2007, Nairobi, a forum in which the common interests of Indians and Africans can play a fundamental role in cementing relations and creating new ones<sup>279</sup>. In the framework of these debates, exceptions related to the formal structure of governance of the WSF and its democracy were taken, in particular about the IC. There was a feeling that it was only a body that provided legitimacy to the IS where all the relevant decisions were taken. Against the tokenism of the IC, the Indians could provide the tools to strengthen and make that body accountable and relevant to the WSF global process. The Indian contribution should also serve the purpose of expanding the base of the BOC. The suggestion was taken on board later that year and the BOC grew from 8 to 24 members.

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<sup>277</sup> A Brazilian friend confessed in an interview during WSF2005, that the Trotskyist soul of the WSF, strong and vociferous in Latin America and Europe (now also in Africa), did not find any counter-part in India. The consequence of their constant attacks to the supposedly undemocratic structure of the Indian process, translated in the smallest ASM (mainly animated by Trotskyist activists) ever to take place in a WSF (only few Indians went to visit the proceedings of those events which in the 5 days saw the participation of few dozen people). Same attitudes, political sectarianism and strategic fragmentation could be observed in occasion of WSF2007 as well.

<sup>278</sup> IOC meeting, 28-29 February (personal notes).

<sup>279</sup> NC Bangalore, June 2004.

The first intervention into the WSF process after WSF2004, was a comment to a paper by the IS and titled "Towards the activity plan of the WSF Secretariat" that was circulated to the Indian activists in March 2004. The author took position against a number of misrepresentations of the WSF by the authors of the Brazilian document. The criticism, for instance, of the "single projects, pretentiously definitive (tending to adopt a leftist single thought) and imposed from above" as the approaches against which the WSF is elaborating its new culture of politics, is creating severe analytical and ideological problems in certain sectors of the ICS. It is naïve, he maintains, to sustain that any theoretical or ideological approach to social change could be able to advocate more than "one" objective. The following criticism is to the separation made in the document between civil society and parties. This separation needs a full politicisation of the sphere of civil society in order to delegitimise political parties as privileged social actors of change. The document in question refuses to accept a definition of civil society as autonomous and independent and able to bring about social change outside the sphere of influence of political parties. Moreover, it states, the decision to cut the relationship between parties and social movements cannot be made in all those countries (like India) where parties are closely related to social movements.

A further point demands additional historical analysis of the roots of the WSF to avoid believing that the WSF has come from a socio/political vacuum. A more conscious analysis of its background and those of its initiators would provide organisers and participants with crucial instruments to assess nature, potentialities and limitations of the WSF in bringing about social change on a global scale; the

author asks: if the forum is not an actor, as its initiators claim, how can it bring about social change? He then suggests that it is necessary to avoid radical dichotomies to avoid polarizing the debate within the WSF. Avoiding non-negotiable dichotomies would then ensure that the WSF could provide "the meeting ground in which hegemonic exercise is precluded because it, by itself, does not lead actions but provides space for those that do".

In another document Purkayastha (2004), member of the IOC, summarises the contributions made by WSF2004 to the global WSF. With respect to the structure of the program he argues that the Indian WSF has indicated the way forward in designing one which allows space to everyone and does not impose the privileged position of the organisers. This suggestion was taken on board enthusiastically by the OC of WSF2005. Purkayastha suggests that regional and local specificities should contribute not only in the creation of networks like the assembly of social movements but also in designing and facilitating the process to build the programme of the forum around the topics each of the networks have a knowledge comparative advantage<sup>280</sup>. A further crucial concern of the author is that if the programme remains a centralised activity the obvious outcome will be that the Brazilians will design a programme every other year whereas other countries activists would do that maybe once in a lifetime: decentralising the programme is then necessary<sup>281</sup>.

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<sup>280</sup> "For example, Europeans can take the initiative on Anti-war programs as also an anti-war activists assembly, Africans on privatisation of State infrastructure, Latin Americans on WTO and Asians on religious/sectarian nationalism and globalisation" (Purkayastha, 2004: no page no.).

<sup>281</sup> IOC list, March 2004.

Another crucial issue for the IC refers to accountability and transparency of its work, inclusiveness of membership, regional and sectoral representation, open and sound internal communication process, negotiation of the traditional cleavages around the space/movement identity. The examples provided and the debates elaborated around the Mumbai event, soon turned into operative ideas for WSF2005. These new proposals were discussed in the following IC meeting in Passignano to which 9 of the more active organisers of the Mumbai forum participated. A global consultation was proposed to select the themes of the following WSF and a small team clustered the suggestions in consistent thematic areas. This process should ensure the expansion of the concept of open space to the design of the programme as well. The issues regarding regional and sectoral representation of the organisations members of the IC was dealt with in a cursory way and although few more organisations were added to the IC it was not possible to establish a solid set of rules to plan the gradual but necessary expansion of the IC. The communication to the whole WSF network of the new substantial changes in the programme and structure of the Forum was drafted by an Indian and a Brazilian activist to tell the importance of the collaborative work of two groups. The new format of the forum moves further toward making the WSF "a space more and more capable of facilitating interlinkages and common actions among the different participants in the process"<sup>282</sup>. The debate in the IC, as shown above was consistently influenced by the contribution of the Indian discourse and its elaboration in WSF2004. But not all the issues dear to the Indians were taken on board in WSF2005. In the Delhi NC in September, the IOC members (now IWC)

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<sup>282</sup> IOC list, May, 2004.

reported their disappointment for topics that were marginalised their efforts notwithstanding: culture, caste and religion<sup>283</sup>.

The participation of the Indians to the organisation of WSF2005 was marginal. However, the intervention of the Indians in the debate on role and functions of the IC helped focus the attention of activists and commentators to the crucial problems faced by the structure of governance of the WSF, but also made many realise that the path to fully negotiated global structures of governance of a process so partially global like the WSF will take a much longer time than expected. The main reason for this was that the importance given to the global scenario by activists from Brazil, Europe, Africa and Asia was only marginal compared to their interest in national and regional politics. It is perhaps this recognition that will produce a more realistic approach to the WSF and its potentialities.

From the main focus on India, the attention of WSF India moved towards South Asia<sup>284</sup>, then Asia and finally towards the global scenario, describing the descending interests of the Indian activists. These were very much involved in negotiating the Pakistan SF into the third polycentric venue of WSF2006, and networked intensely with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal (building on more

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<sup>283</sup> Delhi NC, September 2004: "Politicization of culture was missing in the Commission meeting and this was a problem. If we don't discuss what culture means politically for the WSF, we will just exoticise people, especially different indigenous people. We will have lots of dances but without political context. If protest culture is not imbibed then, culture will be reduced to a simplistic level while exotic presentations of dance and drama will happen" (online interview with former member of the office staff).

<sup>284</sup> IOC list, February 2004: "If we do not act fast then the South Asian political personality will be primarily shaped by so-called market which is an euphemism for US hegemony in the region".

than a decade of so-called 'people to people contacts'). Further, links were consolidated with activists from South East and East Asia in an attempt to create a critical mass at the continental level. Strategic attention was paid also to the African WSF process. This priority list looks very similar in the many places where WSF took place, and in this light is interesting to look into concepts such as global civil society through the lenses of complex interactions of civil society organisations at national, regional and transnational level and how the different interests are negotiated with one another and all constitute the formulation of the normative aspiration towards a better world and the opportunity structure for that change to take place.

### **3. What future for the WSF?**

The future of the WSF is one of the topics on which activists and scholars have trained their critical skills with more urgency<sup>285</sup>. In the following pages I discuss the focus of those debates through the analysis of a set of documents produced by a member of the IC with the objective to facilitate a crucial and necessary debate<sup>286</sup>. The political relevance of the forum at the global level is modest<sup>287</sup>, the increasing numbers of participants to the year events notwithstanding<sup>288</sup>. If the

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<sup>285</sup> A successful series of seminars started in WSF2004 by the title "The Future of the WSF", facilitated by the Finnish organisation, member of the IC, NIGD.

<sup>286</sup> These documents are two long emails submitted to the IC mailing list in April 2005.

<sup>287</sup> Letter to the IC circulated on the IOC list: "during the last Davos forum, for the first time there were no references to Porto Alegre at all. Somehow, people are concluding that the WSF is an internal activity, that does not attain to create global alternative paths".

<sup>288</sup> In one of the emails mentioned above we can read: "From four pages in the FT, in the second WSF by their star journalist Tom Lloyd, we only got a 4.7 inches column for the 2005 WSF. This last WSF, and the last European Forum, had a minimum or incidental presence in the North. In the South, we never had much presence because of the vertical characteristics of the

WSF does not turn itself into a global political actor it would soon become a memory in the activists' past, is the provocative argument proposed by the IC member (see also Cassen, 2004). Self-referentiality and political irrelevance, organisational structure and communication strategies, are the questions that need to be thoroughly dealt with to ensure the survival and the strengthening of the global WSF process. The urgency stressed by many at the IC meetings is perfectly illustrated by the following extract from the letters mentioned above:

Our meetings are to discuss about us. On this regard, the next two years of activities will witness an even more significant reduction of the role of the IC, which will have a very limited role with four forums in 2005 (sic.) and the African forum in 2006 (sic.). And this is even more so for the Secretariat that shall only be a formal element, since people organising the Forums in the next two years will have little to do with the international Secretariat, if the Mumbai experience serves as reference. (...) Mumbai was an extraordinary success because it was the final act of an integration process of the civil society in India.

Apart from the political self-referentiality of the IC another apparently unsolvable problem risks to eventually make the WSF further toothless. The IC is divided broadly along two ideological and tactical lines: those who claim that it is necessary to develop actions and aims for the WSF to still be meaningful and those who think the WSF has to remain an open space. Among the second, 4 subgroups are identified:

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information system that does not have a South-South capacity. But this year it has been worst. The other fact is that the system has taken control of our agenda, as in the last Forum at Davos. And we haven't taken even one action to report the superficiality of this change in the agenda of the establishment. And finally, in the political language, those who want to support the civil society as an element of analysis, are talking less about the WSF, and more about the Global Civil Society".

- a) 'spiritual exercises'. We participate to the WSF not to take actions and decisions, but to meet with others and enrich ourselves and then each one in his/her activity carries out what they feel responsible for.(...)
- b) 'parthenogenesis': when all necessary chemical and genetic elements come together, life is born. (...) the life of our new actions and ideas will inexorably be born from the simultaneous presence of appropriate actors.
- c) 'creative chaos' (the Zapatista methodology). It's not possible to change the world using the instruments that have led it to slavery (...). New paths need to be invented, and the Forum is the great laboratory. (...)
- d) "-ists": consider that the WSF cannot have any kind of institutional purpose, that the Forum should be held every two or three years, and that it cannot grant patents to anyone. And that inside the open space whoever wants to organise, may do so, and these are the actions that represent the political progress of the process<sup>289</sup>.

The impossibility or the unwillingness to discuss this cleavage creates the self-referentiality of the IC and, in a vicious circle, makes the IC even more isolated from its grassroots and from the "world". A further problem of the WSF is its chaotic organisational structure and the at times appalling lack of democracy within it, in stark contrast with the values stated in the Charter. The "horizontal" fetishism is limiting the organisational elaboration and this attitude can only be conducive to replicate the errors exposed by scholars and activists like Jo Freeman<sup>290</sup>: the reproduction within the WSF of structures of marginalisation that belong to the wider society.

We all agree that we have to be as horizontal as possible, that we don't have to bureaucratisate or

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Cock: "the future challenge will be to combine greater organisational impetus while maintaining the inspirational spirit of the WSF" (2004:181).



create institutions that will inexorably end up controlled by white men. But it's not true that 'nothing' is the only alternative. The alternative can be a minimal structure with group guidelines in order to be more efficient and responsible<sup>291</sup>.

Here the problem seems to be negotiating a more and more sophisticated organisational structure rather than expect vague principles of self-organisation to deal with the problems of the WSF.

We cannot spend years fighting against the theory of the invisible hand of the market, and still think that we have another invisible hand that will solve everything<sup>292</sup>.

Self-organisation cannot be expected as a miracle and intentionality has to be imputed into the WSF. In order to achieve the goals fixed by the Charter an innovative, negotiated, sophisticated organisational structure has to be designed that engages with the following issues of the WSF organisational architecture:

The Secretariat, that after its Brazilian origin now is more open with the Indian participation, is considered by everyone as the *deus ex maquina*, that wouldn't give away its power, and uses the IC just as a consultative body. To this we have to add the total lack of communication with the external world, for which the IC meetings appear as closed mechanisms for decisions affecting everyone, but without any rules of transparency and information. This is what those of us who travel and talk to different people are always hearing<sup>293</sup>.

The proposed solution suggests that:

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<sup>291</sup> IC list circulated in the IOC list in April 2005.

<sup>292</sup> Ib.

<sup>293</sup> Ib.

Only with more organization (solidarity fund, proactive actions, rules of priorities) we can take the IC to those areas and sectors that now don't participate. (...) We certainly cannot accept the principle of the ones that are already here, are here; and rules only apply to new participants. We can no longer ask the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO for transparency and accountancy, and ignore these principles when it comes to us<sup>294</sup>.

What seems disheartening is that, although they are conscious of the limitations of the IC action, and although all members have clear the values they subscribed to, the most important being a "new" way of understanding difference and negotiate conflicting positions, what actually happens within the IC is quite different. In the plenaries even when political and strategic issues are discussed, the formula adopted to negotiate the points discussed is neither successful nor satisfying, or even innovative. People are allowed to speak for 5 minutes each, once.

This formula results in a series of unilateral speeches, because there's never time for a second round. (...) Our main sociologist, Boaventura de Santos, says that the WSF is a success because we are using a translation system between us. When communicating, each of us is obliged to translate his or her interlocutor in order to understand, and from this process the new political and holistic culture of the WSF is born. This is certainly not what happens in the IC<sup>295</sup>.

The most disappointing consequence of this communicative methodology is the following:

By not talking about politics, we avoid divisions. I think differences are normal and healthy (and

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<sup>294</sup> Ib.

<sup>295</sup> Ib.

differences do not mean divisions). Differences are what make the WSF stronger. The things that unite us, the common enemy, exploitation, imperialism, neo-liberal globalization, can stand many differences between us. (...) We are all stuck, in the name of a unity the existence of which would be tragic, and that we achieve by avoiding debates on where we are going and what we are<sup>296</sup>.

The final problem is then what kind of rules does the WSF need.

Rules need to have more an ethical than a legal value, and must be subject to a continuous revision process, based on reality and on the world we are living in. But, the lack of rules, is a rule in itself, a rule that codifies injustices, paralysis, and lack of efficacy.

The considerations exposed with great polemical energy in the mentioned documents summarise some of the fundamental limitations of the WSF. They closely recall the debate that took place in India after WSF2004 and in the process of its assessment. These debates show a consistent process both at local (Indian, but also Brazilian, African and European<sup>297</sup>) and at the global level, of critical assessment of limits and potentialities of the WSF. These processes, if not yet conclusive in so many of the most pressing issues affecting the credibility and the effectiveness of the WSF, show the path, the willingness and the ability of the activists of the WSF to engage with the crucial issues determining its future.

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<sup>296</sup> Ib.

<sup>297</sup> A closer analysis of those processes go beyond the scope of the present research but it suffice to say here that those processes recall both the Indian and the IC processes of reflection discussed in this thesis.

## Conclusion

This chapter argued two things: on one side that that the WSF can indeed contribute to the consolidation of progressive national alliances against neoliberalism and, on the other side, the implications of the present research go beyond the Indian scenario and suggest some considerations about the global WSF. In particular, the evidence shows that the global WSF did benefit enormously of the contribution of the Indian activists. I maintain that this shows that recursive processes of mutual constitution of local, national, regional and global civil societies. In the first section I assessed the process through which the Indian activists took on board both criticisms and praises for the WSF2004 event and process. After the initial exhilaration that followed the January event, the months that followed it saw intense discussions on the limitations that it had. The process was itself conflictual (as the overall process discussed in this dissertation) but the unanimous conclusion was the continuation of the Indian WSF experience through the organisation of an Indian SF. The success of the first ISF and the overall consolidation of the WSF process in India allow legitimate confidence that that process will continue after the recent successes. The second section discussed the relationships between the Indian activists and their international partners at regional, continental and global level. Those relationships were often complicated by differences in political and ideological culture; moreover difficulties in translating and negotiating different organisational practices and strategies, coupled with more substantial social differences, added further stress to the difficult communication across wide spaces of global civil society. However, the

section proves that important contributions were given by these contacts, albeit often informed by suspicion, to the overall WSF process and that the consolidation of communication strategies and negotiation practices through reiteration of those contacts promises to strengthen the global alliance built around the WSF. The concluding section speculated on the future of the WSF. While it is not an easy task to indicate what the WSF will be in the coming years (or indeed if it will exist at all) it is however possible to investigate political trends within it. The most important factor creating uncertainty in the WSF is the political and ideological split between those who want it to directly become an agent of change and those who claim that it has to remain an "open space". I showed in this dissertation (see in particular, chapter 4) that the dichotomy is theoretically unfounded. In the third section of this chapter I reported and discussed the direction that some debates are taking the IC. I concluded that those debates, however not conclusive, are nonetheless indicating a potentially successful approach to the issues highlighted. In addition, it is relevant to mention that, after the Nairobi event in January 2007, it was decided to delay the following annual event to 2009. In 2008 the convention will be replaced by a set of actions and demonstrations against the institutions of global neoliberalism to take place simultaneously all over the planet and coinciding with the days of the WEF in Davos. In this sense it seems legitimate to expect the conflict that most of all risked to split the WSF to take a new dimension and possibly to transform itself in other debates that deal with "which" form of organisation does the WSF need, or "which" form of political actions it would take. In the next chapter I summarise the outcomes of the research and its theoretical relevance.

## Conclusion

This thesis asked three main questions: Can the WSF contribute to the elaboration of a viable alternative to neoliberalism? How does it propose to realise its vision of a just and equal world? What are the tools elaborated to fulfil its mission? To answer these questions I limited my analysis to the case of the Indian WSF. The analysis of the case study provided me with the evidence to argue the following. The WSF has the potential to articulate at the ideological level, an emancipatory cosmopolitan alternative to neoliberalism. At the political level, it promises to fulfil its vision by building an alliance among progressive organisations and movements of global civil society contributing to the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic bloc to the world dominant capitalist class. At the cultural level, the crucial tools devised by the WSF activists to build a counter-hegemonic cosmopolitanism are those of radical self-education to wage an epistemological struggle to neoliberalism which challenges the naturalisation of its ideology. The practical tools that the WSF is providing itself with are those of conflict resolution discussed in chapter 5 and 6 based on both difference recognition and the political negotiations and struggle over the social and economic inequality between them. At the tactical level, this thesis has argued that the “open space” discourse has proved a very powerful mobilising tool (chapter 4).

This dissertation has engaged some fundamental issues of the debate on the WSF and some more general on the nature and role of global civil society in processes

of global social change. I briefly summarise here the main analytical contributions of the present work to those debates. In chapter 2, before engaging with the main issues exposed by the current debate on the WSF, I told the story of its history and I established its relations with the history of past movements going back at least to the independence movements in the 50s, the civil rights movements, the '68 and the renewed thrust against international organisations in the 90s. After establishing the theoretical relation with the literature on CSO&SMs in chapter 1 and, with specific focus on India in chapter 2, I engaged (chapter 3) with the question: What is the WSF? Against the polarised discourse on "open space" versus "political actor", I defined, on the basis of the analysis conducted on the Indian evidences, the WSF as a hybrid organisational structure that links loose networks and structured institutional frameworks. Against the analytically limited understanding of the WSF as a space for deliberation I advanced an interpretation of the WSF as a strategic infrastructure aimed at building a counter-hegemonic bloc against neoliberalism. In this sense I suggested that the WSF constitutes the embryonic structure of a postmodern prince, as in Gill's formulation (2000). Against the hierarchical and centralised structure and the vanguardist thrust of past left parties of Stalinist, Marxist-Leninist or even Gramscian inspirations (like the PT of Brasil), the WSF promises to constitute the locus of convergence of those actors who are united by the struggle against the domination of global capital but promises not to constrain them within inescapable and inflexible ideological and organisational boundaries (Baiocchi, 2004). The organisational structure would be decentralised and horizontal and its strategic approach to social change would instantiate a flexible and networked counter-hegemonic bloc. Its

fluid identity and organisational “lightness”<sup>298</sup> would be able to compete on equal grounds with the amoebic structure of neoliberal capitalism (Castells, 1996). It is due to these new features that the WSF is attracting not only actors of the alternative left, traditionally suspicious of conventional party politics, but also those parties like the Brazilian PT, the European LCR and PRC, and the Indian CPI and CPI-M (just to mention some of the most influential within the WSF) who are ready to accept the challenge of the current historic conjuncture (see Santos, 2006) and strive to contribute to the organisation of the huge masses that convene in the WSF events.

On Chapter 4 I looked more closely at strengths and limitations of the “open space” discourse (at the centre of every debate on the WSF). I showed how the open space has proved a strong mobilising tool both in Brazil and in Europe and in the Indian context but its analytical weaknesses risk provoking more ills that the WSF can deal with. Contingent political dynamics and social structures within the CSs need to be assessed rather than waved away in the name of an alleged inherent “openness” of the “open” space. By failing to appreciate these questions WSF2004, as I’ve shown in this dissertation, has reproduced marginalisation and exclusion typical of the Indian society along religious, class, ethnic and cast lines. The assessment of these shortcomings has indicated the need to closely consider both the local socio-political and cultural specificities as well as the global inequalities; the proactive actions to be taken to expand the boundaries of inclusion in the WSF need to release some of the energy dedicated to the mere

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<sup>298</sup> Brazilian IYC organiser, January 2005.



organisational effort to unpacking and exposing inequalities and injustices within the WSF. While such processes frustrate the desire of many to march quickly towards the consolidation of a powerful political actor, I nonetheless maintain that the long-term advantage of a more conscious process of integration of traditionally marginalised groups (even by those struggling for radical social change) like, in the Indian case, Dalit, Muslims and Adivasi, would easily surpass the apparent slowness of which many accuse the WSF.

In this sense, a crucial dimension was introduced in the Indian context that was consistently escaped in the previous incarnations of the WSF and which contributed to the future development of the WSF process: power and interests are part of the WSF and they cannot simply be waved away, rather they need to be thoroughly understood and openly engaged. The process of acknowledgement of the implications of this recognition was just initiated in India and much more need to be done, but it was by far the most important contribution of the WSF India to the global process. The conclusion of chapter 4 was that hegemonic formations in the WSF meet at the social/political/economic crossroads and are privileged instruments to make another world possible. The arguments discussed in chapter 4 are illustrated in chapters 5 and 6 by showing how internal political dynamics to the WSF are based on the structures of Indian social exclusion (like in the case of Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims) and privileges of those upper castes who are best at ease with the political game<sup>299</sup>. Once power dynamics are fully exposed and the

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<sup>299</sup> In this context arguments such as those elaborated by Jeffreys and Lerche (2000) with respect to politics of democratisation and decentralisation of the wider Indian society, are relevant because they expose the inevitable if contested attempt to hijack political structures by elites for their particular interests.

nature of the WSF as a counter-hegemonic actor appreciated, sophisticated forms of leadership can replace old authoritarian ones and collaboration can assume different and more inclusive meaning (chapter 4). For this to be possible naïve and depoliticised approaches to organisational structure, democracy and participation need to be surpassed to avoid the tyranny of structurelessness<sup>300</sup> (or the organisational “invisible hand” as denounced in the documents discussed in chapter 7) and the construction of uncontrollable structures of domination in the WSF.

Struggle and resistance within the WSF (for instance around the alleged space/actor cleavage and the political leadership claimed and contested around that debate) show the inevitably contested nature of the hegemonic process taking place within the WSF (Roseberry, 1994; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The processes of gaining leadership are complex and, when not entailing coercion and violence, as in the case of the WSF, revolve around intricate processes of co-option, persuasion, corruption, and consent played by many actors and interesting many others in configuration always shifting and difficult to pin down. These constellations, after an initial period of rapid and chaotic movement, during the consolidation phase of a movement like the one the WSF has been going through for the past few years (Tilly, 1978), take a more coherent shape around a set of groups and institutions referred to by Mouffe (1988) as “hegemonic formations”. These formations gather, in the WSF, political organisations (parties or mass movements), cultural bodies (NGOs or musical or theatre groups), and

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<sup>300</sup> Freeman, 1970.

organisations that play the role of the fundraiser or have direct availability of financial resources (International NGOs)<sup>301</sup>. These formations are never fully “in control” within the WSF due to the inherent nature of hegemonic processes as described by Roseberry (1994) and as interpreted by an influential member of the IOC (with a trade union background) who defined the “open space” as a “contested space” and leadership within that space as inevitably contested and shifting leadership<sup>302</sup>.

By formulating flexible organisational structures and guidelines based on the values expressed in its Charter, the WSF can take advantage of the creative energy on which hegemonic processes are built: conflict (Gramsci, 1971). This was the topic discussed in chapter 6. The dynamics between hegemonic attempts for leadership within the WSF and resistance to those attempts are inherently conflictual and often exploded in WSF2004 in full fledged confrontations. Rather than considering them potentially destructive, it is crucial that the WSF deals with them and uses them to challenge the social basis on which they are constructed as in the case of the conflicts between left and NGO activists for the leadership of the Mumbai office and of the whole WSF India process. Further illustration of the potential to challenge social structures through conflicts for political hegemony within the WSF, were the many confrontations between Dalit and both big NGOs and left parties activists. While the clashes with party activists were mainly political and ideological, those with NGOs activists were rooted in social

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<sup>301</sup> It is important to recall here that, according to Gramsci, hegemony has a fundamental material base (1971).

<sup>302</sup> In the same informal conversation he told me that this was inevitable but also the source of so much frustration because he could not help but think that some ideal hegemonic formations could be built in the Indian WSF and be made politically very effective (December, 2003).

inequalities and exposed the elitist approach to social change represented by those organisations too often lead by high caste individuals.

A more sophisticated approach to hegemony, leadership and conflict, and their relation with the epistemological struggle discussed in chapter 3, would help the WSF move beyond the stark opposition that many, instrumentally, assume between the two (expression one of hegemonic politics and the other of deliberative communicative action). The inextricable mutual constitution of the two poles of this opposition represent the intrinsic potentialities of the WSF to, on one side, negotiate the shared values (ideology) on which the WSF is building itself at the global level and, on the other, build the counter-hegemonic political bloc against neoliberalism. The features of this process recall Bourdieu's analyses (Bourdieu, 2001). The epistemological struggle is the process by which the counter-hegemonic force opposes the process of epistemological naturalisation imposed by the *hegemon*, what Santos has called the "sociology of absences" (see also Rupert, 2005:460). The process of resistance is based on what Santos called "sociology of emergencies" (2004), through which the process of naturalisation is unmasked and alternatives surface thanks to the work of radical pedagogues, organic intellectuals and subaltern activists (Gramsci, 1971). Neoliberalism according to Santos, through its methodological individualism and its stress on western rationality and science, proposes itself as the highest expression of human potentialities and defines alternative systems of thoughts as irrational, deviant, anachronistic or outright impossible. This process is what Santos calls the sociology of absences. Its effectiveness is ensured by the economic base of

neoliberalism (confront this with the Gramscian concept of hegemony and its necessary material base) and, when not sufficient by its military might (through imperial wars).

The epistemological revolution promised by the WSF and its analysts has taken a very specific shape in India: it was a political process that had to formulate a common acceptable basis for cooperation between worldviews and strategies profoundly different. WSF India promises to facilitate the creation of a more influential progressive civil society in India. Its relation with the political sphere seems to be much more established than the WSF charter would require but through these relationships the WSF gained further legitimacy without losing its crucial features.

The analysis of WSF2004 and its comparison to the global debate on the WSF has identified the polarisation between space versus actor advocates as the main object of contention in the WSF. I acknowledge that this is the central ideological and political *cul de sac* that seems to hint at the limited creative ability of the activists of the WSF to move beyond a formulation of these issues in terms of the traditional political culture that they claim to be able to leave behind them. It is my contention here that the formulation of the terms of the political actor versus open space cleavage (Santos, 2005; Whitaker, 2005) is inaccurate and, at best, it fundamentally aims at a false problem and, at worse, is obtusely polarised. I claim instead (chapter 7) that a thorough look at the WSF would unveil its nature as both a political actor and space for self-education and radical pedagogy.

Moreover, I argue here, the two aspects are, in fact, dependent on and constitutive of each other. A third aspect completes the WSF equation: its ability to challenge social structures of marginalisation by embodying them, fighting them and expelling them (see chapters 5 and 6).

By discussing the issues analysed in this thesis I also aimed at engaging with the mainstream debate on global civil society and social change (Kaldor, 2001; Keane, 2003; Falk, 1997 and 1999). I did this in chapter 1 by discussing the limitations of the approach of some liberal thinkers. In particular, while overlooking the relevance of the dimension of conflict within civil society, they describe it as an open society (or the open space in the case of the WSF) as formally democratic and do not dedicate enough attention to issues of social and economic justice (substantial democracy).

I also asked if the WSF can provide GCS with the necessary infrastructure (Anheier et al., 2004) crucial tools to facilitate its political role towards radical change at a global scale. I argue here in favour of such ambitious goal set by the WSF leadership but I show the many limitations and the obstacles in the WSF progression. The evaluation of the data collected for this thesis substantiated a position that gives legitimacy to the claims according to which it is within the sphere of global civil society that the war of position between the hegemonic forces of neoliberalism and the counter-hegemonic resistance takes place (Gramsci, 1971).

I acknowledge here the complexities created by some approaches to global civil society, especially when confronted with the mainly national interests of some of the hegemonic actors in the WSF. In the case of India, for instance, the immediate mission of creating a political bloc at the national level motivated the majority of activists. But those same activists recognised the fundamental role of the global partners in creating a framework that facilitated the biggest convergence of civil society actors in India. Moreover, it was widely acknowledged that the struggle against neoliberalism cannot be won at the local level and the constitution of strategic transnational networks (and the consolidation of previous existing one) was widely recognised as among the strengths of the WSF (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco, 1997; Khagram et al. 2002.; Slater, 2002; Appadurai, 2002). The transnational dimension provides spaces for an alternative elaboration of national conflicts. Moreover, by strategically allying with foreign partners, weaker actors can enhance their political clout in the internal negotiations with local actors (Khagram et al., 2002) both partners or adversaries.

Although I acknowledge the crucial relevance of arguments in favour of the relevance of the national dimension over the global (Colas, 2002), it is my contention here that all the necessary conditions for a global WSF movement to arise have been realised and proved legitimate after the Mumbai forum (Yla-Anttila, 2005) and later again after the regional forums in 2006 (in Karachi, Bamako and Caracas) and the WSF global event in Nairobi in 2007. It is necessary then to theorise the nature of the global movement that the WSF is inspiring and facilitating. There have been more or less successful attempts to

theorise the WSF as a multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Hardt, 2002), as a global revolutionary movement (Callinicos, 2004), as infrastructure of global civil society (Anheier et al., 2004), as a radical pedagogical movement for the constitution of a global counter-hegemonic bloc to neoliberalism (Santos, 2005). I suggested (chapter 3) that the WSF constitutes the opportunity structure of a global counter-hegemonic movement of progressive global CSO&Ms gathered with the objective to design and perform alternatives to neoliberalism (Anheier et al., 2004). The evidences about this organisational structure show its development towards an organisational form consistent with the formulation by Gill (2000) of the post-modern party.

The scope of the transnational networks and the density of the webs that they inscribe on the global society, along with the strongly normative component of the concept of global civil society (see chapter 1), justify the claims I made here that a) the WSF is a transnational movement that is reaching global dimensions and that b) by designing a path towards the constitution of a global counter-hegemonic bloc and an equally global exercise in epistemological de-naturalisation of neoliberalism and the constitution of an alternative to the liberal cosmopolitanism currently hegemonic.

In this sense, rather than built on a set of a-priori (cosmopolitan) universals we need to understand GCS as a space for the negotiation of and agreement upon a shared set of experienced values. In sum, I suggest here that, although strongly specific and rooted in the Indian history, WSF2004 has directly contributed a) in



the definition of the goals, the strategies and the tools of a progressive alliance of global CSO&Ms and b) a more sophisticated understanding of nature potentialities and limitations of the analytical tool constituted by the concept of GCS.

If the WSF global process seems to proceed, slowly to be sure, towards negotiating a set of values and a consistent institutional structure, some within it negate that any of this may ever take place, unless dramatic changes are implemented. The conflicts are severe within the central structures of the WSF, in particular the IC, and it might be legitimate to imagine an evolution of these conflicts into non-negotiable fractures. However, the argument I sustain here articulates the internal conflicts of the global WSF with national and regional interests of the actors involved in it while giving relevance to local cultural and social specificities. I suggest that until the outcome of organising in the WSF framework promises and fulfils expansion and consolidation of consistent civil society alliances the WSF has still a lot of legitimate work to do. Moreover, unintended (or foreseen only by few visionaries in the WSF) global outcome of an alliance based on local interests, I expect, is the laying out of the premises, and the elaborations of the tools, for the articulation of a new critically cosmopolitan global civil society which may be able to think and act towards another, a better, more equal and just, world. For this to happen without delegitimising the WSF on the way to its ambitious goals, a number of implications can be drawn from the analysis conducted in this dissertation.

The concepts of “open space” and “articulation” and the discourse on GCS that

reached India were formulated by the Brazilians in close interaction (over decades) with European activists and scholars. It was centred on Gramscian political theory complemented by the theorisation by Laclau and Mouffe and by Liberation Theology. The concept of “articulation” crucial to Laclau and Mouffe’s elaboration of the Gramscian concept of hegemony was used to strategically bring together organisations and movements with different political and cultural backgrounds to fight military dictatorship for democracy and citizenship (see chapter 3). All the mentioned tools and the historical experiences made by the Latin American movements (especially the Brazilians) constituted the core of the intuition that gave life to the WSF. The successes reached in Brazil could be replicated, it was the belief of the original organisers of the WSF, at the global level in the field of global civil society. This understanding of GCS was complemented by the Habermasian conception of “public sphere” on which the “open space” was built. The application of this theoretical framework to the Indian WSF proved impossible. Historical and political specificities of the Indian activists were very different and admitted a whole different set of political tools and strategies. A relatively homogeneous political understanding of the politics of resistance constructed in decades (if not centuries) of political action in Europe and Latin America, confronted itself with a much wider range of political and ideological positions in India. Marxists of all flavours (performing hegemony often in Leninist, i.e. vanguardist, rather than in a more Mouffian sense) had to engage with Ambedkarites and Ghandians, secular and religious activists, political and a-political actors etc.

Cultural differences between Brazil and India were stark and relevant and generated the intense negotiations between IOC and BOC members over the nature of the WSF process and its instantiation in India. The encounter between these two very different political cultures, made possible by the WSF framework in the first place, shook the WSF from its Latin American and European universalism and projected it towards a potential new dimension of negotiated (and struggled for at times) cosmopolitanism.

The importance of the specificities of the local political coordinates was exposed fully with WSF2004. Brazilian and European forums were very similar and the organisations leading the process were closely interconnected. This resemblance convinced organisers and less attentive commentators about a fixed set of feature intrinsic to the WSF and already “global” (intrinsic to the WSF as universal a-prioris). The “anomalies” of the Indian forum presented problems that needed to be thoroughly assessed and discussed. The Indian WSF showed how the crucial principles that are foundations of the forum must find deep local resonance (but not only in Europe and South America) to have any meaning at all: in this context, the national/global debate took new significance.

The debates developed within and around the WSF framework suggest that conflicts and negotiations can, in fact, produce positive outcomes if the overall framework is a learning environment (Santos, 2005; Waterman, 2003c). The diffusion of power has to be struggled for and decentralising the organisational activities and the decision-making processes of the WSF could help fragment the

power held by a handful of activists who are turning the WSF into a bureaucracy of global leaders (Waterman, 2004; Albert, 2003; Glasius and Timms, 2006). However, keeping its visionary perspective without caring about the reality around the WSF would be as well deleterious; according to Wallerstein (2002) the WSF: "cannot neglect short-term defensive action, including electoral action. The world's populations live in the present, and their immediate needs have to be addressed. Any movement that neglects them is bound to lose the widespread passive support that is essential for its long-term success". A crucial ideological and cultural shortcoming of the WSF: paternalism, patriarchy and culture insensitivity are still in action in the WSF discourse and negate the principles it expresses if the discussion of these issues is delayed to a future moment when the atmosphere or the world system will be more conducive, not only the WSF will lose legitimacy among those who are giving it more strength (El Saadawi, 2003) but it will, in fact, turn itself into an instrument to keep the status quo (Sullivan, 2005). The WSF is fully aware of his political shortcomings and analytical weaknesses both at the level of its leadership and of the thousands of networks that constitute its global constituency. However, the convergence in the WSF of some many different interests and ideological positions, so much social creativity and political strength, coupled to the inexorable widening of the gap between rich and poor, dominant and dominated, exploiters and exploited, at a global level, guarantee its longevity and a considerable investment of energy and creativity to address the limitations exposed in this thesis.

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